

Multilingual Tutors and the ESL Student

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One of the more difficult aspects of working in a Writing Center for new tutors is the inclusion of international students. The international students who are learning English as a second language present Writing Center tutors with a unique challenge. Tutors who work with ESL students often find it difficult to follow the standard steps of Writing Center tutoring due to language barrier issues and a lack of linguistic experience. This is beneficial for neither the tutor nor the student. Tutors who are proficient in, and experienced with, the study of new languages are able to more efficiently aid in the development of the ESL student's writing ability.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis discussed in Theresa Tseng's "Theoretical Perspectives on Learning a Second Language" can be inversely applied, illustrating that it is easier for linguistically experienced tutors to help ESL students. Tseng states in the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis that it is easier for a student to learn a second language when it is structurally similar to their native language. The inverse is also true. It is easier to tutor for ESL students if the tutor is familiar with the structure of both English and the student's native language.

In order to illustrate the authenticity of inversely applying the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, a survey was circulated amongst the Writing Center tutors at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania and Penn State University. This survey was heavily influenced by Cynthia Linville's article, "Editing Line by Line." In this article, Linville identifies six main error concerns that are common for ESL students: subject-verb agreement, verb tense, verb form, singular and plural noun endings, word form, and sentence structure. The survey addressed these

concerns but instead sought to understand the situation from the perspective of the tutor. It began by asking tutors to identify themselves by their linguistic experience. They could choose from: none, somewhat experienced, proficient, or fluent. The survey asked tutors performance-measuring questions such as, “Do you have difficulty conveying the rules of verb tense?” or “Do you have difficulty conveying the rules of subject-verb agreement?” Tutors had four options from which to respond: none, rarely, sometimes, and often. Despite the relative simplicity of the survey, there was a little room for error. It asked tutors to make a subjective judgment concerning the quality of their ESL tutorials. This leaves for a small variation in what each tutor believed to be difficulty in conveying their information and concepts. Additionally, because this survey was only circulated within Pennsylvania universities, the results apply directly to the demographics of ESL students within Pennsylvania. However, this does not make the results irrelevant to other universities. Based on the responses, it can be definitively claimed that tutors who are experienced with the study of foreign languages can more efficiently help international students.

After organizing the survey results by linguistic experience, the analysis of the tutors who considered themselves to be “somewhat experienced” and “proficient” in the study of foreign languages revealed a trend supporting the efficiency of linguistically proficient tutors. Of the forty tutors who responded to the survey, twenty-two were listed as having some experience and thirteen were proficient. Of the twenty-two somewhat experienced tutors, fourteen of them sometimes or often had problems with a language barrier. Seventeen answered that they sometimes or often had problems conveying the rules of subject-verb agreement. Seventeen wrote that they rarely or sometimes experienced problems with the rules of verb tense. Twelve sometimes had problems with verb form. Nineteen answered sometimes or rarely for singular

and plural noun endings and sixteen tutors sometimes or often have trouble with sentence structure. In contrast, eleven of thirteen students who were listed as proficient sometimes or rarely had language barrier issues. Six answered sometimes and six answered rarely for subject-verb agreement. Six answered sometimes and five answered rarely for verb tense, six answered rarely for noun endings. Seven answered sometimes and three answered rarely for sentence structure.

Tutors who identified themselves as proficient consistently performed better than those with some experience with regards to tutoring ESL students. Proficient tutors had more success conveying the rules of verb tense, verb form, word form, and sentence structure. They have less trouble with four of the six error types identified by Cynthia Linville. One tutor, who was listed as proficient, stated “the problem [subject-verb agreement] comes up a lot, but I can usually convey the rules.” These six error types will continue to be prevalent throughout ESL writings, but, by having tutors with linguistic experience, writing centers can adapt to this and become more efficient.

Writing Centers should strive to include tutors with a broader language background so as to improve the quality of service that they can offer to international students. By working hand-in-hand with a University’s Languages department, writing centers can train their tutors to be proficient in the grammar and sentence structures of several foreign languages. In addition, language experience should be one of the criteria that directors look at when hiring new tutors. Writing Centers should assess the foreign demographics of their campus so that they can work with their language professors on whichever languages are most represented on campus. By learning the basic grammar of other languages, while avoiding vocabulary, tutors can become more efficient for international students relatively quickly.

Bibliography

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