

Same problem, Different Origin

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Introduction

Writing is a complicated process that allows the writer to express his or her ideas in a well-constructed, fine-tuned piece of work. The ability to create and elaborate on one's ideas and thoughts is the foundation for excellent writing. As a writing tutor, I often encounter papers that fail to effectively develop a thesis or topic. Through careful questioning and patience, I strive to guide the writer to elaborate and organize his or her thoughts. There is an important obstacle, however, that presents tutors with a unique set of challenges regarding this problem¾tutoring English as a Second Language Students (ESL). There are more than 3,000 ESL students at Penn State's University Park campus, and the University Learning Center must adequately serve these students (Szpara, 1). Although ineffective topic development occurs in the writing of ESL and Native English Speakers (NES) writers, the root of the problem for ESL students may be unclear. The ESL student may not know how to develop a topic, like many NES students, or he or she might lack the language capability to express complicated ideas. As tutors, how do we decide between these two problems? My paper aims to help answer this question by offering background information, personal and professional suggestions, and further readings on issues surrounding this problem.

Background

Methods for improving the way we tutor ESL students is a popular topic in recent education and writing center research. Due to the increased amount of foreign students in the United States, educators are attempting to find better ways to integrate non-native speakers into mainstream education. The success of students in the United States depends heavily upon their ability to communicate their ideas through speaking and writing. Many ESL students struggle not only adapting to American culture, but also communicating their ideas effectively in their second language. Albert Marckwardt, the author of *American English*, states that "The more uncertain we are of ourselves, culturally or in any other way the more insistent we are upon guidance in specific facts and instances, and the more reluctant we are to rely on an instinctive grasp of these general language patterns" (183). ESL students may not feel comfortable relying on their English Language instincts because they are not comfortable with American culture or language; for this reason, they tend to rely heavily upon the guidance of tutors to fix their writing problems.

However, writing tutors are not editors. It is important for all tutors to teach and guide ESL writers to improve their topic development skills, and to do this we must find the root of the problem. According to Laurel Johnson Black, ESL students often struggle to effectively develop a topic while writing. She summarizes a study by Tony Silva: "On the whole, he [Tony Silva] reports, the writing of ESL students is judged to be 'simpler and less effective' by NES; their essays are 'shorter, contain more errors...and their orientation to readers was deemed less appropriate. They were, overall, less 'sophisticated' (101). This raises an important question: Why? An article by Muriel Harris and Tony Silva offers two explanations: "Does a thin, undeveloped two-paragraph essay an ESL student brings in indicate a need to talk about how to develop topics or is the student's lack of language proficiency in English keeping her from

expressing rich internal sense of what she wants to write about?" (528). At Penn State's University Learning Center (ULC), I have encountered this problem with ESL writers, and it is difficult to decide the extent to which these two explanations apply to that particular writer. If the tutor makes the wrong assumption about the writer's skill level and language proficiency the session might not be productive because the writer is not getting the help they need.

What to do

Tutors can help struggling ESL writers improve their topic development skills and express their ideas in writing. Through observation and practice, I learned that initiating conversation with the writer about his or her topic helps to differentiate between the writer's incapability to develop a topic and their lack of language to express their ideas. While tutoring an ESL graduate student, I had difficulty seeing the progression of her thesis development. I asked her clarifying questions such as "Why did you chose this topic?", "How did you conduct your research?", and "What were some of the results of your research?" She responded with great enthusiasm. She had many ideas on how to elaborate on her research, but she did not know how to express these ideas in Standard English. Although she needed elaboration on a few of her main points, I used our session to help her improve her language skills to effectively expand one paragraph of her paper. For example, she often used the verb "doing" in conjunction with another verb: "doing cross country running." My experience showed that it is more effective to teach the student how to improve their writing so they can fix it. I also made sure to encourage her to come back to the ULC to go over her changes; this way she did not feel as if I did not want to help her.

I also tutored an ESL student who had trouble developing her ideas. When she read her paper aloud it sounded like a typical NES paper, but she told me that she did not have a lot of writing experience. Although I used conversation to understand her ideas, I handled this situation differently then the first ESL student. I focused more on teaching her strategies, such as using examples and citing sources, that would help her elaborate on a topic. I also offered her suggestions on where to find sources. I geared our session around her whole paper and topic rather than just a paragraph, unlike the first ESL student, to help her see the development of her ideas throughout the paper.

The two writers I mentioned were very willing to learn and receptive my suggestions; they made it very easy for me to determine the origin of their topic development problem. Not all writers will be as willing to share their ideas as these writers. Some students are shy and quiet, and they may feel uncomfortable talking with you about their ideas, especially if they are insecure about their English speaking and writing ability. Laurel Johnson Black suggests asking the writer to free-write for a few minutes; she says that this helps the writer develop their ideas (101). I also think that this is a great way for the tutor to evaluate the progress of the writer. As a tutor, I would suggest to the writer to free-write in their native language. This might help the writer elaborate on their topic and express their ideas to me if they have limited English language capabilities. Through casual conversation, patience and suggestions, tutors can help ESL students expand their English language and topic development skills.

Complicating Matters

Tutors can implement these strategies and suggestions to help ESL writers, but these solutions are not always clear-cut. There are many issues surrounding ESL students such as culture and writing style or grammar, and it is important for tutors to remember that all ESL and NES students are unique individuals with different needs and abilities. To stereotype any grouping of writers can limit your ability to successfully help them improve their writing. Just as the skill level of ESL writers varies, so does their culture, which has a huge impact on their writing. Nancy Hayward states, "Writing about tutoring [ESL] students without grounding it in a discussion of culture is like trying to sail a boat without knowledge of wind. It can't be easily done" (1). Different cultures have different styles and expectations for writing, and as tutors we must take this into consideration. One of my sessions opened my eyes to culture's impact on writing. I tutored an ESL student from Nigeria, and his paper aimed to prove that papers should not have a length requirement because long papers are ineffective. I was very shocked by this paper topic, but I was interested in his reasoning. He simply stated that some people could express their ideas in a few words while others need ten pages. To support his claim, he talked about his writing experience in Nigeria. This writer argued that paper length and topic development are not correlated. His reasoning was grounded in his experiences in Nigeria. As a tutor, I think that it is important to consider that some cultures may elaborate more than others, and we should aim to help writers improve their writing while maintaining their cultural identity.

Conclusion and Further Readings

Helping ESL students can be both challenging and rewarding. As we face these unique challenges and learn to truly listen to a writer's ideas, we can cater to their needs, whether they are rooted in language difficulties or thesis development. This is a broad topic with many solutions and approaches, so if one solution does not work, keep trying! To help you find more information I attached to this paper an annotated bibliography with a list of sources that you can consult on issues surrounding tutoring and ESL students. As we continue to tutor, we must remember that all writers are individuals with varying abilities and cultures, and we need to strive to help these ESL students improve their writing.

Works Cited

Annotated Bibliography