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To be a Directive **AND** non-Directive Tutor

When I started working as a writing lab tutor at Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO), Cape Girardeau, Missouri in early 2010, I noticed there were two camps on how tutoring of English Language Learners (ELLs) should be accomplished —directive vs. non-directive. Each camp strongly advocates that their philosophy on tutoring is best. However, as I gained more experience tutoring, I soon realized I was using both methods.

The key differences between the methods are shown in the table below:

	Directive	**Non-Directive**
Author(s)	Shamoon and Burns (1995)	Brooks (1991)
Who leads the conference	Tutor	Student
Dialogue	Question and Answer (Q&A) Dialogue: The student asks questions; the tutor replies with answers and explains the "what's," "why's," and "how's."	Open- Ended Dialogue: The student asks questions; however, the tutor replies with further what's, why's and how's questions.
Knowledge	Tutor teaches the knowledge to the student.	The student teaches him/herself through "A-ha Moments."
Relationship	Vertical Tutor > Student	Horizontal Student = Tutor

To test my hypothesis, I process recorded—a technique similar to that used in social work recordings (Columbia 36-43)—twenty-six (26) tutoring sessions I had with several ELLs who came into the writing lab at that time. Only seven ELLs had rudimentary or better English proficiency levels. Analysis of the field notes I kept showed that while tutoring I was using a combination of directive and non-directive methods. Still, those were random meetings; I wanted to see the long term effect of this combination with one student.

In the middle of the spring semester I was presented with an opportunity to test my hypothesis. A Japanese SEMO student requested weekly tutoring in the writing lab. She

possessed above average English listening and speaking skills; however, her English reading and writing skills were poor. At that time, she was taking a remedial English writing course. She wanted to pass the placement exam and enroll in the freshman composition course. We had a total of fifteen (15) sessions between March and May 2010. The sessions normally lasted an hour but sometimes a conference could last up to three hours. Her essays were photocopied and three random sessions were videotaped. Finally, I wrote a personal journal of these tutoring sessions.

The analysis of the aforementioned research techniques, plus a comparison of her earlier and later papers, showed that when using a combination of the directive and non-directive tutoring methods, three measureable outcomes were produced.

The first outcome was that I could tutor this ELL in both higher-order concerns (HOCs) and lower-order concerns (LOCs). In a typical writing lab conference, tutors concentrate on higher-order concerns (HOCs): thesis statements, audience and purpose, organization, and development. In contrast, the ELLs want to concentrate on lower-order concerns (LOCs): sentence structure, punctuation, word choice, and spelling.

One day the Japanese student came into the writing lab confused because her instructor rejected her draft for an observing paper. Her opening paragraph was:

> The summer will be coming soon. During this season, I have summer break, lots of events, and my birthday that's why this season is my favorite. Last year I was in Miami this has not like other cities in the U.S.; it's in the Sothern *[spelling error]* part of the States, many immigrants, and beautiful Ocean.

It would have been easy to concentrate on the LOCs. But I felt that because of her above average listening and speaking skills, I could concentrate on the HOCs.

I said, “First off this is not even a paper. There is no thesis statement; there is no development or organization. Really, where is your thesis statement?” (Directive)

She said, “I want to write about this photograph when I was in Miami Beach.”

“You have a picture! This is not even close to the picture… Okay! What do you want to talk about?” (Directive)

Blank stare.

“Let’s look at the bigger picture—do you know what constitutes an observing paper?”

Blank stare.

“An observing paper is showing not just telling.” (Directive)

Blank stare.

“Think of an observing paper as telling a riddle.” (Directive)

She finally spoke, “Really! You can do that?”

I said, “Yes! I believe you know some Japanese riddles.” (Non-directive)

In the end, she wrote a vibrant paper about the picture she had shown me of her vacation with her boyfriend in Miami Beach. In the picture both were wearing shades and holding their surfboards. Many of her sentence structures were much improved; e.g., “I am hold a wooden plank [a surfboard] that the same color as Wal-Mart’s logo.” “We were standing on the beach with cotton balls [clouds] floating above our heads” (Non-directive and LOCs). In the process of improving her HOCs, her LOCs improved as well.

The second outcome was that this Japanese student started writing about her own ethos and pathos. I had noticed, from previous experiences, that ELLs prefer writing about American

culture. But they don't understand it. Thus, their papers do not make sense; e.g., a Chinese student came into the writing lab with an arguing paper that supported the prohibition of guns by citing statistics from the National Rifle Association. His ethos and pathos did not match the logos.

In another session, the Japanese student had to write a personal essay.

I said, "So? What do you need help on?" (Directive)

She said, "I have no idea." (Directive)

"Let's see! This sounds like a remembering (a type of narrative) paper. Do you know what a remembering paper is?" (Directive)

"No."

"It should have a dilemma in a thesis statement, conflicts and tensions through the body, and a resolution in the conclusion." (Directive)

Blank stare.

"The assigned essay directs you to write about something outside of school. Any work experiences?" (Directive)

"Yes, I did something in the US … (I forgot what it was)." (Directive)

"No! Part of writing any paper is to use your ethos and pathos. Write about something in Japan." (Directive)

Then her light bulb came on; she had an "A-ha Moment." (Non-directive)

She wrote a narrative paper about accidently switching a passenger's plane tickets while working at the Osaka airport. The elements—dilemma, conflict and tension, and resolution—were present in the draft.

This was the first time I ended the session saying, “I hope you learned something today.” She then summed up what she had learned that day. From that day on I ended the sessions with the same catchphrase, “I hope you learned something today.” This allowed the Japanese student an opportunity to share her opinions and reflections on materials she had learned during that session. Moreover, her sharing allowed me the chance to improve my skills in assessment, curriculum design, and instruction.

Because I was honing her strengths (non-directive) and improving her weaknesses (directive), her papers and the recordings show that she was gaining confidence in her writing. When she first arrived in the writing lab, she had no confidence in her writing skills. Towards the end, she knew how to write a thesis statement (HOC) and could edit her own grammatical mistakes (LOC). Before the spring semester closed, she was able to pass the placement exam. I believe she had empowered herself.

In conclusion, regardless of the ELL’s language skills, the ELL can benefit from a combination of directive **AND** non-directive tutoring methods. The tutor can use the directive if the ELL’s subject knowledge is poor and switch to non-directive when the student’s subject comprehension is average or above. This will empower the ELL to sharpen his or her strengths (non-directive) and improve his or her weaknesses (directive); thus, the ELL can become a better writer.

Work Cited

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