

ESL: Every Student Learns

By Lou Londino, Penn State University

Every tutor has had to work with a particularly difficult student at one time or another. Some students are stubborn about their work, and some are too timid to engage in a discussion. Others do not even want to go to the Writing Center, but are forced to by professors. Although these tutorials may frustrate tutors, the most challenging deal with students struggling to convey ideas, paper organization, plagiarism, and, as is the case for most ESL students, understanding the fundamentals of the English language. One student, however, rarely embodies multiple problems, and works with almost every tutor at the writing center.

In our writing center at Penn State, there is one ESL graduate student who comes into the Writing Center multiple times per week seeking help on the same type of assignment. She brings in an article that must be summarized and analyzed and asks a tutor to help her go through it line by line, finding synonyms for certain words to change the article's appearance but not its overall meaning. This is, of course, plagiarism. Many of our tutors, including myself, have struggled to work with her. Besides the obvious ethical problem of aiding in plagiarism, our tutors have found that she lacks a basic understanding of both the written and spoken English language. Perhaps because of the language barrier, she can come off as obstinate in her unwillingness to change her approach to the assignment. Our tutors have often felt forced to choose between denying her assistance and conceding to her demands, which amount to cheating.

When I first worked with her, I, too, felt as though I had to "pick my poison." I must admit that I, not wanting to cast her aside, did help her in going through the article changing words. After a grueling, ninety-minute tutorial, I decided that if I ever had to tutor her again, I would do something, anything different.

I did have the opportunity to work with her another time. Once again, she came into the Writing Center, hoping to receive the same aid as always. Instead, I asked her to try something else. Though reluctant at first, she agreed. I started by asking her to read the articles aloud and helped her with any words she struggled to understand. When she finished, I offered to write an outline with her, summarizing what we had just read together. To construct this outline in her own words, I asked her what the overall point of the article was, what evidence the author provided to support his claim, and whether or not she agreed with it. I wrote down her answers, helping her choose appropriate words reflecting her own thoughts, not just repackaging the original article with synonyms as before. She struggles with spoken English, but can engage in a discussion, provided we speak slowly with her.

We concluded the tutorial by making another outline, one could serve as a template for her future assignments. At first, she was unsure of how to go about writing it, so we talked for a few minutes about the various ways to do so. We decided to start with a general summary of article one, move to a summary of article two, and finish with a comparison between them. Such a formula started to get her thinking about what she had read instead of focusing on rewording it.

I learned from this ESL graduate student that regardless of the assignment or the student, getting the tutee to think about what they want to say is paramount. Sometimes a fresh, creative approach is all that the tutor needs to connect with an ESL student.