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Goals for a Writing Center Tutorial: Differences among Native, Non-native, and Generation 1.5 Writers

Grant Eckstein
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah

Students sometimes attend their university writing center with goals that contravene the center's philosophical approach. For instance, a writer may seek proofreading help on an early draft even though many centers prioritize higher issues of rhetoric or organization over language. Ideally, tutors are trained in these situations to "negotiat[e] with the writer on a mutually agreeable goal" (Gillespie and Lerner 49) such as identifying error patterns instead of "fixing grammar." Such negotiation is important because, as Carol Severino, Jeffery Swenson, and Jia Zhu explain, "a key factor in whether students are receptive to tutors' advice . . . and then use the advice to revise is whether tutors ask or discuss with writers the kind of feedback they want" (108). Moreover, Terese Thonus similarly argues that successful tutorials are characterized in part by the degree to which the tutor and tutee agree on the objectives of the tutorial early on. Laurel Raymond and Zarah Quinn explain that when tutors ignore writers' goals, they "risk robbing students of their authority over their papers, isolating them from their own writing processes and inhibiting [the tutor's] ability to connect with them [the writers]" (65). All of this is to say, as Muriel Harris does, that "Our success in achieving our goals [as tutors] is likely to increase in direct proportion to our ability to recognize the student's goals" (33).

Recognizing and responding to students' goals has grown in complexity over the last 30 years as increasing numbers of non-native English speakers (NNESs) with grammar and language needs have begun attending university writing centers in the U.S. According to the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors Report*, nearly one million undergraduate and graduate international students were enrolled in U.S. higher education during the 2015-2016 academic year, a 7.1% increase from the year before and the highest enrollment ever recorded. Yet, surprisingly little research has compared the writing center goals of true international stu-

dents (those who come from other countries to study in the U.S.) to their mainstream, native English speaking (NES) counterparts or to Generation 1.5 (Gen 1.5) students, who use English as an additional language but have been educated in the U.S. Linda Harklau, Kay M. Losey, and Meryl Siegal describe these writers as an in-between group of U.S. immigrants. Gen 1.5 writers tend to display wide heterogeneity, but as a general description, they have native or near-native oral proficiency even while their written English and grammar knowledge may lag behind. Joy Reid calls them "ear learners" because they develop their English proficiency informally through activities with friends or incidental conversations at school (76). In principle, Gen 1.5 writers differ from international NNES writers since the latter typically hold student visas to study in the U.S. after completing high school or its equivalent in a foreign country (Ferris). NNES writers are sometimes referred to as "eye learners" because they traditionally learn the English language in international contexts while studying grammar rules in order to develop language mastery (Reid 76).

The present article focuses on comparing the reported goals of these three groups of students (mainstream NESs, international NNESs, and Gen 1.5 students). Given that students' purposes for attending writing centers may range considerably depending upon their language background and level of competency, investigating and contrasting student goals in aggregate can give tutors and administrators additional insights into the perceived needs, goals, and differences among the three groups of writers.

To investigate student goals, I developed an online survey for writing center attendees and, with IRB approval, directly emailed more than 800 center directors, via the International Writing Center Association contact list, with a survey link to forward to students. This effort resulted in responses from 462 students (79.4% undergraduate; 19.6% graduate; 1% pre-college) in 26 U.S. states who had recently attended a writing center tutorial. The survey contained numerous demographic questions (such as length of residence in the U.S., language spoken at home, prior enrollment in a U.S. high school, year in school, etc.) in order to distinguish NES from Gen 1.5 and NNES writers. Based on responses to the survey, I identified 280 (60.6%) as NESs (86% undergraduate, 14% graduate); 105 (22.7%) as Gen 1.5 writers (88.6% undergraduate, 11.4% graduate), and 77 (16.6%) as NNESs (53.2% undergraduate, 46.8% graduate). In addition, the survey asked students to self-identify their main goal in attending their most recent writing tutorial from a selection of eight options, which reflected

feedback categories from my own experience as a writing tutor and composition teacher to NES and NNES students: 1. help with grammar, 2. punctuation, 3. essay formatting, 4. organization, 5. style, 6. research, 7. idea formation, or 8. idea expression. This delineation of purposes was intentional to keep the results systematic and to avoid what Severino, et al., refer to as "creep" (115) in which open-choice categorization loses consistency as hundreds of responses are coded. I recognize that a forced-choice survey also has the potential to limit respondent participation. Of course, such a survey may also present limitations and false dichotomies: what one student considers to be grammar might be punctuation to another (a point I discuss more below), and in many cases a writer comes to the writing center with an agenda prescribed by a teacher or a blanket request that masks a deeper concern. To reduce these conflating variables, the survey asked students to report on the purpose they had for their *most recent* tutorial in an effort to allow students to be guided as much by their own recollection of their purposes as any deeper purposes the tutor helped them identify.

The data from the survey is formatted in Figure 1 below, which illustrates student purposes across all language groups. The data reveals that NES writers who responded to the survey largely reported wanting help with organization, NNES writers overwhelmingly reported wanting grammar help, and Gen 1.5 writers had a somewhat hybrid NES and NNES response pattern.

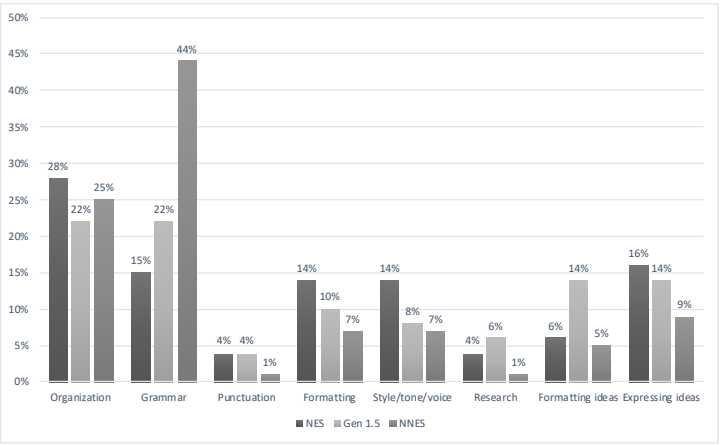

FIGURE 1: Individual Feedback Goals Compared Across Language Background

ORGANIZATION

The data indicates that organization was an important goal for writers across all language groups. In fact, help with organization

was the single most popular purpose among NES writers, nearly 30% of whom reported it as their top concern. Exactly one-quarter of NNES writers had the same purpose, and a little over 20% of Gen 1.5 writers also went to the writing center for organization help.

GRAMMAR

Unlike paper organization, help with grammar varied from group to group. Only 15% of NESs listed grammar as their main purpose while nearly 50% of NNES writers indicated the same. This finding should come as little surprise; even if NNESs have excellent language proficiency, they may want to seek native-speaker input. Yet the term "grammar" means different things to different groups of students. Sarah Nakamaru argues that "the ESL learner, the applied linguist, and the monolingual English composition teacher or writing center tutor likely do not conceptualize grammar the same way" ("Theory in/to Practice" 119). "Grammar" for NESs, for instance, tends to mean issues with punctuation, conjunctions, prepositions, confused words, and agreement issues (see Connors and Lunsford; Gillespie and Lerner). Meanwhile, Janet Lane and Ellen Lange identify common NNES grammar issues that include verb tense, verb form, sentence structure, word order, and article concerns. In addition, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner argue that the request for grammar help can also be a catch-all phrase for multifarious agenda items that students may lack the vocabulary to express (51). So while the survey findings on grammar show how strongly many NNESs feel about grammar help, especially when compared to their NES and Gen 1.5 peers, these findings also highlight how much more difficult it may be for NNESs to articulate goals beyond grammar help.

Survey results also show that about 20% of Gen 1.5 writers reported seeking grammar help, placing this group between NNESs and NESs. Yet once again, Gen 1.5 aggregate grammar needs are likely to be unique. Stephen Doolan and Donald Miller provide quantitative evidence to show that NES and Gen 1.5 writers differed significantly from one another in their verb errors, preposition usage, and word forms. Jennifer Ritter and Trygve Sandvik further explain that Gen 1.5 writers come to the writing center with grammar, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary errors. Not all of these errors are purely grammar mistakes, and Nakamaru points out that when working with Gen 1.5 writers, tutors often conflate lexical issues with grammar errors and avoid "'giv[ing] words' to students, for fear of appropriating their texts or raising suspicions of plagiarism" ("Lexical issues" 108). NNES scholars ex-

plain that Gen 1.5 academic language issues stem from the fact that these students develop most of their grammatical knowledge from participating in non-academic English conversations (Reid), but Ritter and Sandvik also note that these students are still developing English language proficiency and may have limited literacy exposure, which can affect their written control of language. All of this suggests that working with NESs, NNESs, and Gen 1.5 writers on grammar errors requires a nuanced approach that interprets the notion of "grammar" differently for each group and perhaps each individual.

OTHER TRENDS

Other interesting trends appeared in survey responses from each language group. For instance, NES writers were mainly concerned with paper organization, but four other categories received almost equal weight with one another: grammar, style formatting (APA, MLA, etc.), style/tone/voice, and expressing ideas. This variety suggests that NES writers have very diverse goals in attending writing centers and likely have very rich ways of expressing those goals in a free-form discussion about their interests and needs in a tutorial.

The NNES writers surveyed exhibited a different pattern of writing center goals that overwhelmingly favored grammar, as discussed above, and then organization second, and expressing ideas as a distant third. NNES writers showed little interest for any other category and were particularly uninterested in punctuation help. That is, NNES writers appeared to have a very narrow conceptualization of their writing center agenda driven by grammar and, to a lesser extent, organization. Although NNESs largely wanted grammar help (whether that was their true goal, a teacher's request, or a catch-all phrase for other issues), tutors have been repeatedly advised against "giv[ing] in to the easy inclination to tackle LOCs before HOCs" (Gillespie and Lerner 121) since it is thought that students are unlikely to revise on a higher scale if local text has been scrubbed free of errors. But language instruction may actually be its own pressing need, as Sharon Myers argues when she says, "writing tutors are perfectly positioned to facilitate the language learning these students need" (64). Moreover, Jennifer Staben and Kathryn Dempsey Nordhaus, who work extensively with NNES writers, explain that it is possible to "balance toward the middle ground between text and language—or shift more toward language" (87) when tutoring these writers.

The third group, consisting of Gen 1.5 writers, exhibited a combination of NES and NNES characteristics in that they reported an

identical weighting for both grammar and organization and a NES-like preference for help expressing ideas. This finding suggests that Gen 1.5 writers overlap in some ways with NES writers and in other ways with NNES writers, a conclusion that other practitioners have drawn (Ortmeier-Hooper). In addition, a relatively high proportion of Gen 1.5 writers reported wanting help forming ideas, indicating a need for brainstorming and invention help. Taken together, these findings may mean that Gen 1.5 writers also very much need the kind of specialized and individual support a writing center can provide, including agenda negotiation and practices of offering vocabulary or language assistance to meet very specific needs.

While the findings above provide an interesting look into the goals of different student groups, there are several complicating limitations, the most obvious being the difficulty some students may have in articulating their goals. In addition, students undoubtedly have different needs/goals depending on the type of paper and draft they are writing, the expectations of their teachers, and their educational level (i.e., undergraduate or graduate). The data presented above may therefore change in specific contexts. Furthermore, the forced-choice response survey necessarily limited student responses and may have subsumed other goals, such as seeking help understanding the assignment prompt or reading. Even with these limitations, the present findings are still instructive in that they suggest a sort of pyramid of language goals in which NNES writers, near the top, are highly focused on language issues and NES writers, near the base, have many diverse goals, while Gen 1.5 writers inhabit the space in the middle. An interesting future study may be to look at student goals by language proficiency and educational level (graduate vs. undergraduate).

With more understanding of what NES, Gen 1.5, and NNES students want help with (in general and in aggregate), writing center directors and tutors can be even more prepared to meet diverse student expectations and negotiate tutor and student roles and agenda items. Admittedly, it is perfectly reasonable for tutors to determine writers' needs during tutorials, but when those needs include structural grammar instruction or extensive vocabulary help, for instance, tutors need specialized training to negotiate and address these topics. This is particularly true for novice tutors and/or tutors who work with a wide range of language learners. Ultimately, understanding even more what multilingual students tend to want and helping them meet these goals within the writing center's philosophical approach is bound to result in satisfying tutorials for both tutors and students.

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