

Bridging the Gap: Essential Issues to Address in Recurring Writing Center Appointments with Chinese
ELL Students
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Overview

- Population of international (especially Chinese) students is growing in U.S. universities
- Writing associates are typically taught to be indirect and prioritize high order concerns
 - Typical training: asking leading questions, hedging (softening message with *maybe, kinda, could, possibly*, etc.)
 - Typical strategies are not always effective for English Language Learners (ELL) who “may have writing experiences different from those of native speakers or may have brought perceptions of tutor-tutee roles from their home countries” (Nan, 50)
 - Tutors may feel limited with ELL students in terms of what to say and how to say it due to language barrier
- How do we address expectations of ELL students specifically in the writing process?
 - Author synthesizes research at his home university writing center to highlight common feelings and challenges among ELL writers

ELL Session Goals

ELL student... feels comfortable/engaged

... Understands what’s going on

... Is motivated to continue revisions after the appointment

Effective writing partnerships are crucial—they allow for immediate and long-term improvements in a student’s writing

Before a Session

- Explore cultural differences and how these may appear in an appointment setting
- For some ELL students, their standard of writing in English may have been limited in high school (e.g. vocab memorization, grammar tests)
 - These students may come to college without preparation or practice in forming analytical and argumentative papers
- Argument styles are different in U.S. and Chinese structures
 - Rhetoric and organizational patterns are varied with culture
 - In China: more emphasis on the “beauty of a student’s language” (Nan, 53), focus on integrating the work of multiple authors
 - Thesis comes at the end of the paper; “spiral”
 - Writer-friendly
 - In the U.S.: more emphasis on making an individual argument about course material
 - Point-evidence-explain structure, direct, “original thinking and creative engagement with multiple academic sources” (Nan, 54)
 - Reader-friendly
- Tutor-Tutee roles
 - For some ELL students, their experience with rules of speaking in an academic setting may be different than in U.S. classrooms
 - Potential for authority imbalance
 - Student may expect tutor to be in full control for the duration of the session
 - May not feel comfortable asking questions of clarifying any confusion

Suggestions

- Be careful of falling into the role the student expects of you (e.g. Professor)
- Be mindful of crowding the student with your own expectations or objectives

- Consider prioritizing higher order concerns (although lower order mistakes may be penalized more harshly by a professor)
- Be clear that our goal is to help the student develop as a writer as opposed to grading
- Assess writer’s knowledge
 - Ask student what they know about U.S. academic writing, what their background is like
 - “What do you think a thesis statement is in college writing?” (Nan, 56)
- Be direct
 - Students may need more direction initially, especially in clarifying points
 - Tutors must be prepared to “make direct changes for writers while modeling specific examples before expecting [the student] to flourish under the usual indirection” (Nan, 56)
 - If ELL students cannot “hear” their grammar mistakes, continual prompting will become frustrating—it’s okay to take a direct approach, pointing out and correcting errors so they can learn for the next time
- Explain why
 - “A sentence is never just ‘bad,’ it’s ‘bad because’” (Goldman, 29 Sept.)
 - Remind writer that we are not perfect and at the end of the day, it’s their paper— they are encouraged to make suggestions or ask questions!
- Watch for body language
 - If there is a language barrier, students are likely to pick up on body language or tone if they are having a hard time understanding your words
 - Be honest and clear, “do you need me to repeat what I just said?” (Nan, 58)
 - Ask direct, specific questions to encourage student engagement
- Small talk
 - Make student more comfortable with talking in the first place by chatting, encouraging two-way dialogue
 - Ask them about themselves first, build a little confidence
 - ELL students may need a little more time to respond to queries if they have to translate the question into their native language and then translate their answer back into English.
 - Can ask if the student needs more time or wants you to rephrase the question
- Evaluate
 - Throughout the session, check the student’s comprehension to make sure they understand your suggestions (e.g. have them take notes as you talk and see if they match what you have said)
 - Can have the writer repeat ideas back in their own words, or ask for their input on a revision
 - “Why do you say that? How did you arrive at that?” (Nan, 59)
 - Follow up, look through graded papers and go over professor’s comments

TL; DR

Improvements don’t come overnight! Remember to encourage your student by highlighting areas of strength in their work!

Check in with students to see if particular techniques are more/less helpful for them, everyone is different and will have different preferences.

Take time to connect with the student and find common ground, it’s worth it to spend a few minutes getting them comfortable.

Be mindful that you don’t know everyone’s background, and always give students the benefit of the doubt.

You got this!