

Challenges and possibilities in tutorials in a writing center in Japan

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In recent years, interest in English writing centers as a support service for students' writing beyond the regular curriculum has been growing in Japanese universities. Our writing center at the University of Tokyo was established under a first-year scientific English writing course in 2008. Our writing center offers tutorial sessions for students' L2 (English) writing in L1 (Japanese) on a one-to-one basis. This article provides a brief introduction to our writing center and describes the challenges that tutors face, which are unique to writing centers in contexts where English is a foreign language. In this article, I would like to focus on three major points: the issue of grammar correction, tutors' English proficiency, and tutees' unfamiliarity with the writing center and tutoring style. This article also discusses the roles and possibilities of writing centers in Japan for both tutors and students.

近年、日本の大学において、正規課程外で学生の英語ライティングを支援する機関として、ライティング・センターへの関心が高まっている。東京大学のライティング・センターは、2008年に、理系1年生のための英語アカデミック・ライティング・プログラムのもとに設立され、学生の科学英語論文に対するチュートリアルを1対1の形式で、日本語で提供している。本論では、本ライティング・センターの取り組みを紹介し、さらに現在直面している3つの問題点（文法の修正に関する問題、チューターの英語力に関する問題、学生のライティング・センター及びチュートリアルに対する認知度の低さの問題）に焦点をあてる。また、EFL環境下にある日本のライティング・センターが学生とチューターの両方に与える影響を明らかにし、日本の英語ライティング・センターが果たす今後の役割と可能性について検討する。

Although writing centers have opened in many universities in the United States, it cannot be said that the concept of a writing center is widely recognized in Japan. Since 2004, a few Japanese universities have established writing centers, but the number of writing centers in Japanese universities is still small. Although studies on writing center administration have been widely conducted, only a few empirical studies have so far been made on writing center tutorial practice in the Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) context (Hays, 2010; Sadoshima, Shimura, & Ota, 2009). In the near future, as the number of writing centers in Japan continues to grow, studies on tutorial practice in Japanese writing centers will become necessary in order to provide more effective tutorials with EFL writers. This article will provide a brief introduction to our writing center at the University of Tokyo and describe the challenges that our writing center faces in the tutorials.

Our writing center, which is called the Komaba Writers' Studio (KWS), was established under the Active Learning of English for Science Students (ALESS) program in 2008. ALESS is a scientific academic writing course for first-year undergraduate science students at the University of Tokyo. In this course, students are required to design and conduct an original small scientific research project (usually an experiment), write a paper about the experiment in academic English, and give an oral presentation in English. In addition, in-class peer tutoring (review) on each other's writing is included in this course. All ALESS instructors are native or near-native speakers of English with advanced degrees. The classes are conducted in English.

Our writing center offers individual assistance to ALESS students and occasionally other first-year undergraduates on their writing assignments. Our writing center is open five days a week and offers 40-minute sessions on a one-to-one basis. Students can make an appointment with a tutor online. The tutorials are usually conducted in Japanese. The tutors in our writing center are graduate students from various departments and they are

native speakers of Japanese or are fluent in Japanese. In order to become a tutor, we have to take a one-semester course in second-language writing pedagogy (teaching and tutoring English academic writing).

One of the innovative features of our writing center is that there are two kinds of tutors, writing tutors and science tutors. Writing tutors, who come from various disciplines, consult with students on their papers, while science tutors, whose majors are chemistry, physics, and biology, hold science workshops and give advice on the experiment that ALESS students design and conduct for those papers. Sometimes a writing tutor collaborates with a science tutor and provides a joint tutorial session with a student. Joint sessions are often held when students are writing the results and discussion sections of their papers. In a joint session, the writing tutor focuses on issues related to organization and language, while the science tutor provides feedback on how to analyze the data the student obtained in his or her experiment from a scientific and technical perspective.

Another feature of our writing center is that it offers students an opportunity to receive feedback on their English writing in Japanese. Some students cannot understand or misunderstand what their instructor says in the class, which is conducted in English, or what they are supposed to do for their homework. The tutors can check online what each instructor is teaching and can provide support tailored for each class. Thus, our writing center can also serve as a complementary support center for English writing in the students' first language (L1), Japanese. Although in recent years English classes have started to be conducted in English at some junior and senior high schools in Japan, most secondary-level English classes are still conducted in Japanese by teachers whose first language is Japanese. If our first-year undergraduates receive feedback from our tutors in English, it may be difficult for them to understand the tutors' advice or suggestions, especially with regard to sentence-level grammatical issues, and the students may even become confused and uncomfortable, because they are not familiar with that style of instruction. Another reason for conducting the tutorials in Japanese is that tutoring in a common native language is less likely to cause problems related to differences in cultural background, such as those pointed out by Kennedy (1993) or Blau and Hall (2002). Therefore, as Sadoshima et al. (2009), who examined the effectiveness of tutoring

English writing in Japanese, reported, when Japanese students discuss their papers with their tutors in Japanese, the students are more likely to become actively involved in the discussion by asking and answering questions and raising new topics. The results of Sadoshima et al.'s study also indicated that when tutoring is conducted in a common native language for tutors and tutees, the tutees tend to act more as peers of the tutors.

The number of tutorials in our writing center has been increasing yearly. In the first year, 2008, the writing center offered a total of about 350 tutorial sessions, and by 2011 the number of tutorials had increased to about 630. One likely reason for this increase is that, since 2009, our writing center tutors have started to visit the writing classes to introduce the writing center, hand out flyers to advertise the center, and explain what kinds of things students can do there. Our writing center also holds an open house each year to promote the center. Through these activities, our writing center's visibility increased. In a follow-up interview with tutees conducted after a tutorial session, some students remarked, "At first, I could not imagine what the writing center is and had no idea what to do at the center, but after receiving a tutorial session, I realized how helpful it is to the writing process." Others mentioned that tutorial sessions gave them a clearer idea of what to do with their papers and that they could learn revision strategies from tutors through the sessions. Students who have visited our writing center once are more likely to return for further tutorial talk to improve their writing.

Our writing center has also undertaken various efforts at tutor training, including tutorial observations and occasional meetings and workshops to share information on the problems and difficulties that each tutor faces. As part of this tutor training, the more experienced tutors give advice on effective tutorial methods to novice tutors.

At the same time, we tutors face some challenges which are unique to writing centers in contexts where English is a foreign language (not the first language). First is the issue of grammar correction. In our writing center, tutees who are not native English speakers tend to ask their tutors for grammar corrections in their writing. However, we tutors are encouraged to focus more on content and organization than sentence-level errors in tutorial sessions and to help students revise through discussion in order to avoid being a "fix-it" shop. According to the

student questionnaire conducted at the end of the semester, many students complained that they wanted their tutors to correct the grammatical errors in their work.

The issue of grammar correction still remains controversial in the field of second language (L2) writing pedagogy. Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007), for example, makes strong claims that grammar correction is not only ineffective, but also harmful in L2 writing classes. In contrast, Ferris (1999, 2002, 2004, 2006) offers rebuttals to Truscott's argument and asserts the effectiveness of grammar correction in L2 writing. Gally (2010) points out that "Truscott's argument about the ineffectiveness of grammar correction in L2 writing classes could be harnessed to discourage grammar correction in writing center tutorials" (p. 70). Although the debate on grammar correction in L2 writing pedagogy is still under discussion, we need to deepen the discussion on the need for grammar correction in writing centers (especially in EFL writing centers) as well.

One of the biggest differences between American writing centers and Japanese ones is the educational environment. In American writing centers, grammar correction in English as a second language (ESL) student writing has become a much-discussed issue. However, ESL students such as international students at American universities, who are in an educational environment where daily communication is conducted in English, are immersed in English. In contrast, Japanese students seldom have an opportunity to be exposed to English outside of English class. Therefore, writing centers in EFL contexts, at least our writing center, are places where students can not only receive feedback on their English writing, but also learn English because our language of daily communication is Japanese.

In general, tutors are advised to avoid proof-reading students' papers in writing centers. However, the fact that students can feel more confident about using English by promoting their linguistic accuracy of English cannot be ignored. Myers (2003) supports explicit language instruction for ESL students and encourages tutors to play a role both of writing instructors and foreign /second language teachers (p. 64). Harris and Silva (1993) suggest that "tutors need to distinguish between errors that will interfere with the intended reader's understanding of text (global errors) and those that will not (local errors) and to give priority to the former" (p. 526), instead of trying to force themselves to reject grammar corrections. Tutors have to help

students become aware of language issues by themselves and heighten their language awareness through tutorial discussions. Providing language help to students is required to respond to this demand and can also be an essential part of the teaching and learning of English writing, especially in EFL contexts like Japan.

Another challenge for our writing center is that, although all of our tutors are fluent in English, most of them are not native English speakers and sometimes may make mistakes. For example, it is reported that in one case the parts the tutor corrected in a tutorial session were pointed out as being strange by the student's instructor; the tutor was very shocked and now has some anxiety about her tutorials. In my informal interviews with other tutors, many commented that they have this kind of experience and they are worried that this can lead to a lack of trust from both student writers and the instructors who teach the writing course. However, I believe that our tutors have an advantage precisely because we are not native English speakers. We can be role models as Japanese EFL learners who have acquired a high level of English ability and academic writing skills in English. Our tutors have experienced the same issues our students face when writing in English as a foreign language. Hence, we can understand why students make certain mistakes or write in certain ways, and we can therefore respond adequately to the tutees' needs. At the same time, we are continuing our efforts to improve our own English proficiency, which leads us to become even more confident tutors.

A third challenge for us is that Japanese students are not familiar with our tutoring style. In Japan, the idea that the tutor and the students have the same authority is culturally hard to accept. The students tend to think that tutors are a kind of instructor for them, that is, the tutors perform a more authoritative role than the students. Therefore, students tend to be passive and follow their tutors' advice without any question, and during the sessions, some students do not become actively involved in the discussion. This could be due to the educational environment in Japan. In Japanese schools and universities, one-sided teaching by the instructor is common in regular classes (except courses such as seminars) and, as a result, the students tend to become passive. Therefore, when they hear that they can be given support on their writing at the writing center the students often misunderstand or expect that they will receive feedback (mainly grammar correc-

tion or proofreading) on their writing without any discussion. The problem of how to increase students' understanding of tutorials as interactive discussions remains to be solved. As mentioned earlier, our writing center has made efforts to have tutors visit writing classes to introduce the center and explain its tutorial practices and encourage students to visit, but we are still looking for other ways to increase visitorship even more.

As Gally (2010) claims, although the concept of writing centers in Japan has been influenced by American-style writing centers for non-native speakers of English, not all aspects of American writing centers can be applied to writing centers in Japan, where English is a foreign (not just a second) language. The linguistic, social, and cultural context is significantly different from the American case. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a writing center suitable for the Japanese EFL learners. Writing centers in Japan are places where students can not only receive support for both their classes and their English writing but also engage in English learning beyond the regular curriculum. Our writing centers are also places where tutors can improve their English ability and gain teaching experience, because some tutors aspire for careers as English instructors at universities. In this way, Japanese EFL writing centers have multiple functions for both students and tutors.

Although the history of writing centers in Japan is still short, they have been progressing and developing based on the needs of their institutions and students. The Komaba Writers' Studio also will develop further and explore the future role and possibility of our writing center in fostering autonomous writers in writing centers in Japan.

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