

Learners helping learners in an EFL writing center

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The writing classroom cannot provide all the instructional assistance that is needed for learners to become proficient writers (Harris & Silva, 1993). Depending on class size and the proficiency level of students, instructors are limited by time and resources and thus cannot be the sole provider of writing assistance. It is for this reason that a writing center for EFL learners was created. This paper will discuss the steps taken for creation of a writing center, and report the ongoing findings of native and non-native speaking tutor/tutee dyads in a writing center at a private university in Japan. Data, consisting of interviews, and a questionnaire submitted by tutees were gathered. Analysis showed a need for peer tutors, an under-developed resource in the Japanese EFL environment. Finally, a discussion on the current state of this writing center and a recommendation for future writing centers in Japan is provided.

第二言語としての英語を勉強する学生は、ライティングクラスでの勉強だけでは堪能な英語の文章を書くことは難しい。限られたクラスサイズと授業時間及び学生のレベルによって、先生たちがすべての英文を教えることはできない。本稿では、本大学に新しく設置されたライティング・センターの現況について述べた。質問に来た学生に対応するチューターとしての役割を英語母語話者の教員だけでなく日本人学生（英語学習者）も担うという新しい試みを紹介した。さらに、センターを利用した学生に対してインタビュー調査とアンケート調査を実施したところ、日本人学生（英語学習者）によるライティング支援を今後も強く望んでいることが明らかになった。この結果は、日本のようなEFL環境において日本人英語学習者がライティングチューターとして果たしうる役割やその大きな可能性を示唆している。最後に、現在のライティング・センターと、今後日本におけるライティング・センターへの展望について、議論が展開される。

THE NEED for a writing center became evident after a number of students majoring in English Communication had requested help with their English writing compositions. Through brief encounters with these students, it was found that they needed help with the basic skills of writing (e.g. organization, grammar, mechanics, and structure). However, it was quickly discovered that their only concern was to have their grammar checked. At this point, it was obvious that their focus was on product not process. Ideally, a writing center is meant to be a place for students to focus on the “process approach” (Brown, 2001, p. 335). To this extent, the goal of this writing center is to help students become better English language writers, or as North (1984) says “our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (p. 438). From the start of this program, it became apparent that cultural phenomena would have a profound impact on the tutor/tutee dyads, and how they perceived each other’s roles.



The mission of this program is to provide writing support for undergraduate students majoring in English Language Communication.

Defining a writing center

For the past 30 years, writing centers have existed in college level institutions. It is generally a place where university students can go to receive help with their writing. Reid (1993) describes a writing center as “usually being staffed by writing professionals whose job it is to advise and encourage inexperienced writers” (p. 214). However, it is not only the inexperienced writers who need help, but also advanced writers. There is no label attached to what type of student should attend writing center consultations. Leahy (1990) explains how the image of writing centers is that of “remedial facilities for students with special problems in writing” (p. 45). Leahy goes on to explain that writing centers are for all students “who come with just an assignment and no idea where to start, with some scribbled notes or an outline, or with a completed draft. They also want to work with all writers, even the strongest ones” (pp. 45-46).

Typically, a writing center will operate as a part of an academic department or learning center for all students. Their size and settings vary among different institutions, usually at the college level. Harris (1986) notes that, “Although writing centers may differ in size, shape, specific services, source of staffing, and organizational procedures, they share the same approach” (p. 31) This approach is to have tutors aid and assist the students they meet by focusing on the student and not the tutor. Tutors may be peers, professionals, graduate students, part-time faculty, or full-time faculty. They meet with writers who come to the writing center either briefly or for an extended period of time. In the case of this university’s writing center, consultations are for 30 minutes. Various things occur during this timeframe; general ideas can be re-focused, common grammar errors can be pointed out, and students will be able to

correct their own grammar errors. Having only 30-minute sessions will also hopefully encourage more visits.

Writing centers in Japanese universities

Over the past couple of years, the trend has been for more and more Japanese universities to introduce writing centers. These centers are being created not only at public and large private universities but smaller universities and colleges as well. Each one has been uniquely devised to fit the individual needs and resources of the university. Recently, there have been articles published on writing centers in Japan (Sadoshima, 2006; Yasuda, 2006; Johnston, Cornwell, & Yoshida 2008). Johnston, Cornwell, and Yoshida (2008) explain and compare writing centers at two of the larger universities in the Tokyo area. However, there is still a void to be filled with regard to EFL learners in the role of tutors. Even though there are EFL learners employed as tutors in universities in Japan, many of them are graduate students in larger universities. The issue of peers helping peers has yet to be explored in depth. This is not to suggest that there is no interest in peer education, but shows the complexity of this issue especially with regard to EFL learners helping other EFL learners. No two writing centers in Japan are identical in their approach and purpose in providing English writing support.

The challenges for a writing center in a Japanese university

There are a number of possible challenges that face writing centers in universities where the student body is made up of EFL learners. However, for the purpose of this paper, the challenges have been narrowed down to: 1. Being able to explain the writing center’s pedagogy, and 2. The tutoring approach used for correcting student errors. It is anticipated that more challenges will arise as writing centers develop and gain more experience.

Writing center pedagogy

In the case of North American writing centers, tutors need to be able to explain that their role as a tutor is fundamentally different than that of an instructor. The role of tutor in North American writing centers is that of collaborator: to work interactively with tutees in order for them to find their own solutions. Therefore, these tutors should not see themselves as *instructors* who *tell* things, but rather who help explain and share ideas, but never *tell* tutees what to do (Harris & Silva, 1993).

In the Japanese context of learning, students may find these tutoring sessions strange and frustrating since they come from a culture where the role of teacher is that of *teller*. The teaching pedagogy in Japanese education is almost entirely focused on teacher-centered lectures to large classes of students; the use of small groups for instructional purposes is extremely rare (Okano, 1993). This being the case, a new approach that brings together both methodologies needs to be created in order to keep with writing center principles and Japanese learner sensibilities. In the case of this writing center, tutors are aware of student expectations, and the cultural manifestations regarding the culture of education in Japan. Therefore, they may already be in the habit of *telling*. However, this should not become their primary style of interacting with students; they should *tell* only when appropriate, which should be limited at best. To help tutors become better trained with regard to this, training focused on tutor collaboration, not *telling*, should be emphasized.

Error analysis

Tutors will need to evaluate which errors need to be corrected and which do not. Harris and Silva (1993), explain 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). For the sake of collaborating with students rather than *fixing* their papers, choosing only the most severe errors to correct in this case (global errors) can give students something to focus on. They must understand that their papers will not be error free nor should they be expected to produce such papers. In his seminal study on error correction, Hendrickson (1978) found that “when teachers tolerate *some* student errors, students often feel more confident about using the target language than if *all* their errors are corrected” (p. 388). Teachers are aware that when learning a foreign language, students are going to make mistakes. Students in return must also realize that they are going to make mistakes which are necessary for the process of learning.

Depending on what phase of the writing process students are in when they visit the writing center, tutors should only be concerned with correcting errors which inhibit the comprehension of the written composition. While the tutor is going through the paper, students should be following along, either by looking at the same paper or a separate copy. This promotes understanding and hopefully will make the student more aware of the errors, where they occur, and how they can be corrected. The tutor needs to share with the student ways they can look for their own mistakes, and how to correct them in the future. Consultations may become counterproductive if students continue to come for the same errors over and over again. This is why editing is a counter productive practice in writing centers.

Creating a writing center

During the fall semester of 2007, third and fourth year students majoring in English Language Communication preparing for their graduate theses in English were in need of assistance. More than at any other time, it became apparent that something had to be done to address this issue. The problem that arose through the influx of students requesting help was that most native Eng-

lish teachers (NET) became inundated with students wanting to have their papers corrected. The challenges this presented to the NET was that they were in effect acting as independent writing tutors, which became very taxing on their own time. Through this experience it became evident that a writing center would be needed to cater to these students as the number of students writing their thesis in English increased.

The aim of this writing center is to develop the English writing skills specifically for students majoring in English Language Communication; however, in the future, all students of this university will be allowed to come for help with their English compositions. The goal is to help students become proficient, independent writers, through the following activities:

- Consulting with staff and faculty members on all types of English writing assignments and papers.
- Discussing the processes of writing (i.e., prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing).
- Providing writing materials for student and faculty use (e.g., dictionaries, grammar books etc).
- Encouraging English writing in all forms including homework, short-essays, and research papers.
- Providing an informal link among students, and faculty members on issues related to English writing.
- Providing a non-threatening, non-graded environment in which anyone may talk about any aspect of English writing (Hays, 2008, p. 149).

An appropriate location for students and tutors to meet should be seriously considered. It almost certainly should not be in an out-of-the-way building, as it would inconvenience students. One of the reasons for creating this writing center has been the anticipation of students using this facility. However, if the location is in an obscure place, it will be difficult to attract students. This was the concern held by the faculty members

involved in the creation of this proposal. Considering these concerns, a room adjacent to a student lounge area, where academic counseling and English speaking services are currently provided was selected.

Since its creation, the writing center has become more clearly defined, and student feedback has been collected. New goals and services will constantly be added as the needs and goals of the students change. The process for creating the writing center spanned over six months, during which time it was necessary to meet and discuss the desired function with faculty members of the English department. The purpose of these meetings was to promote and gain support from the faculty before the proposal was submitted. These meetings were held four times, each with a different faculty member. The positions held by these faculty members were: writing coordinator, department chair, associate dean, and dean. This process of consensus building among faculty members proved to be an invaluable first-step in gaining support for the proposal. Consulting with colleagues about any new ideas before a formal presentation, is advantageous in any society, however, this proved to be especially relevant in the context of a Japanese university. Therefore, knowing its importance has proved to be a great asset during the undertaking of this project. Throughout this process of introducing the idea of the writing center, the feedback I received from colleagues was invaluable.

Materials

According to Harris (1986),

The heart of the writing center is the interaction of tutor and writer, and little is needed for this except facilities for the two people to sit together, plenty of scratch paper, and references writers need such as: dictionary, thesaurus, style manuals, and some grammar books. (p. 49)

For this writing center, textbooks and references with an emphasis on EFL learning will be the most important materials used. Since it will be specifically designed for L2 writers, any materials helpful for students and tutors will be considered. Additional materials that may be beneficial are self-instruction workbooks, texts and reference books. In order to provide materials that appeal to a variety of learners, computer programs, CDs, books, and DVDs, may also be available. However, the purchasing of materials will be controlled by budget constraints. It will also be necessary to have a number of flyers, posters, and literature for advertising and explaining about the writing center.

Staff

The staff may consist of students, graduate students, part-time instructors, professionals, or faculty. For the writing center at this university, tutors are both instructors and students. An emphasis on hiring undergraduates as tutors has been made because there is a strong case to be made for students helping students. It is a very important role that can lead to greater understanding of the target language, and what better role model for underclassmen learning English than to be helped by their *sempai* (seniors). Potential tutor candidates have been considered based on their abilities and not whether they are a native speaker or not.

Regarding peer tutors, there have been several studies conducted which show that the impact on those being consulted by peers has mostly been positive. Ender and Newton (2000) state that, “in many cases people learn best by having role models who can demonstrate productive ways to act in a common situation” (p. 7). With the right training, a non-native speaker of English can qualify to be a peer tutor. Ender and Newton also note that in order to become an effective peer educator, “you will find it necessary to examine your personal strengths

and weaknesses as a helping person, know problem-solving strategies, and learn and practice specific helping skills” (p. ix). Through a tutor training program, advanced students may be able to develop and improve the skills needed to become an effective tutor.

Bruce (2004) states that “When students enter one-to-one tutoring situations for the first time, they expect tutors to manage introductions and dictate the ways sessions will go” (p. 30). In order for the writing center to fulfill its purpose, tutors must inform the student of what their role is (i.e., what they will do and what they won’t do). Depending on the students’ cultural background, expectations will vary and this may lead to greater confusion or even anger if the tutor does not take the time to explain the tutor’s role and the purpose of a writing center. In order to create greater synthesis among all staff, tutors need to work together to share ideas and experiences from helping students. By sharing this information they will be able to share their awareness of the kinds of questions students ask, and the expectations of tutors.

The director

Writing centers are usually headed by a faculty member or administrator, capable of training tutors, and interested in individualized instruction. The director should be someone who fully understands the benefits and challenges of operating a writing center. Experience in teaching writing is preferable, but not necessary. Writing center directors are called on to handle a variety of tasks that they may have had no prior experience with, but they need to be or become adept at publicity, public relations, accounting, evaluation, administration, training, and often, grant writing (Harris, 1986). At the beginning stages, the most important job for the writing center director is to recruit and train tutors, create and maintain their schedule, maintain the reservation list for students, and be responsible for all ma-

terials necessary for the functioning of the writing center. This is a very demanding position, made even more strenuous if the director also has teaching responsibilities. Therefore, it is highly advantageous if the director has a limited number of classes to teach every term.

Tutee perceptions of writing center tutors

Prior to the start of this program, peer tutors experienced a seven session (10.5 hours) training program to prepare them for tutoring peers. In the spring semester of 2009, the writing center was in full operation from July 6th to July 20th. It was at that time that four out of five tutors were L2 learners. During this three-week trial period, 31 students, all majoring in English Language Communication came for writing assistance. Of these 31 students, five came back for repeat visits. At the end of the trial, all 31 participants responded to a questionnaire in which they were asked specific questions regarding their experience with peer tutoring. The following data represents the findings from a

questionnaire distributed to these participants. There were eight items, seven of which were questions, while the last item asked students to comment on their feelings about the writing center.

The following table shows the results of the questionnaire for items 4.1 to 7. Participants were expected to give a rating from one to five (one = “disagree”, and five = “strongly agree”) for items 4.1, 4.2, 4.3. Items 5, 6, and 7 were *yes* or *no* answers. It is important to note that not all participants answered every question. The questionnaire was administered to the tutees after the completion of the tutoring session. They were instructed not to write their names and to return the completed questions to a clerical staff member. This procedure was meant to ensure that participants would remain anonymous, thus encouraging participants to answer the questions honestly.

The results of the questionnaire show that tutees on average reacted positively to their experience in the writing center. They were satisfied with the help they received and the friendliness of the tutors. With regard to the tutee opinions on whether peer

Table 1. Questionnaire regarding peer tutoring

Questions	Y	N	1	2	3	4	5	N	M	SD
4.1 Were the tutoring sessions helpful?			0	0	0	7	16	23	4.69	0.46
4.2 Were the tutors friendly?			0	0	0	4	19	23	4.82	1
4.3 Do you think this is a good system?			0	0	0	7	16	23	4.69	0.84
5. Was the tutor knowledgeable?	24	0						24		
6. Do you think the Writing Lounge should have teachers as tutors instead of peers?	8	17						25		
7. Should the Writing Lounge be required for 1st year students?	29	1						30		

tutoring is a good system or not, the results were very positive. One participant wrote that “I could be relaxed when working with the tutor.” When asked whether peers or teachers should be tutoring, a majority of respondents (17 out of 25) replied that they thought tutoring should be by peers. A student remarked that “When I am helped by a peer, I can feel relaxed; I cannot relax with a teacher, because they are teacher.” Six students did not reply to this question, because they had not received help from a peer tutor. Their tutor was a teacher.

The overall results of this questionnaire were very interesting to this researcher. It was anticipated that tutees would appreciate the work of the tutors, but ultimately would prefer to have teachers as tutors. This presumption was based on the fact that most classroom practices revolve around teacher-centered instruction. In a follow-up interview conducted at random with five tutees after a tutoring session, tutees validated the findings of this survey by agreeing that peer tutoring was good because they enjoyed interacting with their peers, and that it was “good to be helped by peers, because it gives me a goal for the future.” This suggests that peer education can possibly be a motivating force for learners. However, more research needs to be carried out to see how peer education can lead to higher levels of motivation for learners. Three out of five tutees commented that they would like to be peer tutors in the future.

Conclusion

Since the creation of the writing center in 2008, more than 200 visits have been made.

Currently there are four peer tutors, all of whom are undergraduate students majoring in English Language Communication. The center is co-directed by a faculty member and administrator. Tutees have widely accepted the role of the student-centered approach used by the tutors. However, there

are instances when tutees requiring immediate help become irritated with peer tutors when they cannot correct every grammar mistake especially when it comes to article usage. While a majority of these students have accepted the instructor’s role as writing tutor, there are still a few students who have become irritated by the refusal of staff to passively correct grammar mistakes. This type of behavior is expected as part of the growing pains of the program.

The implications for the writing center at this university are to evaluate the needs of English writers, and through this, explore the potential transferability of this program to other Japanese universities. As writing centers continue to be created throughout Japan, it is the hope of this researcher that these centers will share information and approaches. Johnston et al. (2008) are correct when they proclaim that there is not one *Japanese model* for a writing center. The fact of the matter is that institutions have to adapt to the needs of their students and the resources provided by administrators. The writing center described in this paper is only the beginning of what will hopefully develop into a sustainable peer-tutoring program where English composition writing is the focus. In the future, as more English classes are offered in Japan and other Asian countries, the need for a special interest group for writing centers in organizations such as JALT could be a good first step to sharing the potential benefits of writing centers throughout Japan, and Asia.

Bio data

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