Western pedagogical models of writing center tutorials: Can they be effective in the Middle East?

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a study of writing center tutorial practices in a Middle Eastern university where the language of instruction is English. Data from stimulated recall activities, written observations, and interviews were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of writing center tutorials in a Middle-Eastern Writing Center. The data revealed that tutees noticed an improvement in their assignments, believed that their concerns had been addressed, and that they had acquired transferable skills. Most tutees assessed their tutors positively, valuing tutors who inspired confidence and were able to explain concepts clearly. Although tutees appreciated knowledgeable tutors, they valued egalitarian peer-tutoring relationships. Tutors reported that tutorial sessions improved their tutees' assignments and that tutees had acquired transferable skills. Nevertheless, tutors were critical of their own performance. Some tutors admitted to lacking the knowledge necessary to explain certain writing concepts, including grammatical concepts; some felt they dominated the tutorials, and others felt their approach was too directive. The data revealed that both tutors and tutees preferred the directive approach for lower order concerns and a non-directive approach for higher order concerns. This study shows that diverse tutoring models that accommodate the background and experiences of Middle Eastern students, and their particular strengths and weaknesses, should be considered. It recommends tutorial training that emphasizes flexibility and recognizes the distinctive nature of each tutorial situation and the opportunity it presents to address the needs and expectations of individual students. These findings could signal a direction for the development of writing center pedagogy that focuses on the linguistically and culturally diverse students in the Middle East.

Key Words: Tutorial interaction, NNS tutorials, Middle Eastern students, Peer tutoring

Introduction

In recent years, educators have become increasingly aware of the importance of developing writing centers in educational institutions. In North America, most high schools, colleges, and universities today provide writing centers to help students improve their writing skills. Writing centers offer free, individualized writing assistance from trained consultants or trained peer tutors. During writing center tutorials, students and peer tutors work together on various aspects of writing, including thesis development, organization, outlining, paragraphing, sentence-structure, wording, vocabulary, and mechanics. Most writing centers strive to teach students to recognize and correct their own errors with the goal of making them more confident, self-sufficient writers (North, 1984).

Writing centers in North America have typically eschewed a directive approach to instruction, preferring a non-directive, collaborative approach. With non-directive strategies, learners take an active role in the tutorial. Tutors are encouraged to promote a sense of responsibility in the student for their writing: "Make sure that writers take ownership," "Trust the writers' ideas of the text," "Ask them their plans for revision," and "Keep hands off and let writers make corrections" (Gillespie & Lerner, 2006, p. 45). With directive tutorial strategies, the responsibility for the tutorial is placed in the tutor's hands. The strategies used with this approach include "mak[ing] corrections on the page" and "tell[ing] writers what to do" (Gillespie & Lerner, 2006, p. 45).

The directive approach to instruction has been supplanted by the non-directive approach, and many tutors attempt to honor non-direction in their interactions with their writing center tutees (Blau & Hall, 2002; Brooks, 1991; Carino, 2003; Jones, 2001; Shamoon & Burns, 1995; Thonus, 2001, 2004; Williams & Severino, 2004). There is a compelling amount of evidence, however, that even though tutors seek to maintain a non-directive role with their writing center tutees, in actual practice, the peer relationship reflects a more complicated dynamic. Grimm (1996) identifies the "loss of innocence" among researchers and practitioners regarding the dynamic and influence of the tutor-tutee relationship in day-to-day writing center work, while Shamoon and Burns (1995) critique the notion of "pure tutoring" in writing center pedagogy. Some researchers have observed that the notion of the tutor-tutee relationship that envisions an egalitarian balance and does not allow for an authoritarian aspect in the interaction is

untenable. Over the last 15 years there has been a growing movement to challenge the orthodoxy of the non-directive peer tutoring perspective and to identify and consider the real-life conduct of the peer interaction to determine its impact on the effectiveness of instruction (Clark & Healy, 1996; Grimm, 1996; Henning, 2001; Shamoon & Burns, 1995; Thonus, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004; Weigle & Nelson, 2004).

Non-Native Speaking Students in the Writing Center

The questioning of the peer relationship and the effectiveness of a strictly non-directive approach to tutoring have emerged out of the growing research focus on the learning of non-native speaking (NNS) students who come to English-language writing centers (Harris & Silva, 1993; Thonus, 2004; Williams & Severino, 2004). Some studies indicate that NNS students may benefit from a more directive approach in their tutoring interactions (Blau & Hall, 2002; Shamoon & Burns, 1995; Thonus, 2001, 2004; Williams & Severino, 2004).

A study was conducted to examine the tutor-tutee relationship in an English-language writing center in the Middle East, serving students for whom English may be a second or third language. There is relatively little research on English language learning on writing center work with this population.

Context of the Study

The Middle East University (MEU), a pseudonym for a university located in the United Arab Emirates, receives hundreds of foreign students annually. According to the 2009 Institutional Research University Board, the student body consists of 20% Emirati students, 42% students from the rest of the Arab world including Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, and Syria and the remainder are from countries including Iran, India, and Pakistan. The university curriculum is modelled on the curriculum of American universities; it has received American accreditation, and the language of instruction is entirely in English.

Approximately half the MEU students have been educated in schools where the language of instruction has not been English. Most of the students in this group have been educated in Arabic school systems. The remaining students have been educated in a number of school systems, including Urdu, Hindi, Persian, and Afghani. English is the second or third language and occasionally the fourth for many of the students. This situation is characteristic of many American, British, or Australian universities in the United Arab Emirates.

All students at the university are required to take 15 credits of communications courses as part of their major programs. The challenges these students face while writing in English is a serious concern for faculty members and students. As part of an effort to address writing issues, the university established a Writing Center with a peer tutoring program in the 2004/2005 academic year. Students are strongly encouraged by their instructors to visit the MEU Writing Center where they will receive individualized instruction.

Following the American writing center model, both in the use of the term peer tutoring and in the organization of the Writing Center, MEU offers one-on-one tutoring sessions by appointment or on a drop-in basis to all students throughout the university. Instructors teaching writing-intensive courses or courses with a writing component often encourage or even require their students to visit the Writing Center for supplemental help. Students can also self-refer. During the tutoring sessions, tutees and tutors work on global concerns such as improving content, organization, and tone and/or local concerns such as clarifying confusing or improperly constructed sentences, correction punctuation, grammar, and mechanics.

The Nature of the Research Problem

In the peer tutoring program which was implemented in 2004/2005, tutors were trained to use a non-directive, collaborative approach to tutoring. They were encouraged to promote an egalitarian relationship by establishing rapport with their tutees at the beginning of the session, sitting "side-by side" with their tutees to mitigate the nature of the authoritarian tutor-tutee relationship. They were advised to encourage the tutee to be an active participant in the tutorial discussion by asking the tutee to read aloud, placing the assignment in front of the tutee, and giving the tutee control of the pen or pencil or keyboard if working at the computer.

Tutors were advised to use non-directive strategies, such as asking questions about the tutees' goals and assignments, negotiating an agenda, outlining/mapping with the tutees, asking tutees to explain and clarify their ideas orally, asking tutees to write independently, and asking questions to develop critical self-awareness. The tutors were trained to facilitate this process by responding as readers, and by practicing the use of silence and wait time. Although tutors tried to implement the recommended strategies, it soon became increasingly clear that this approach was not always effective. Tutors expressed frustration about trying to elicit knowledge tutees did not have; they suggested the tutors were deliberately withholding information, or that they were not sufficiently knowledgeable about writing. Tutors were then advised to modify their approach and to use a directive approach when they thought the non-directive approach was not effective.

Tutors were advised to use the directive approach when they felt they had no other recourse. They were cautioned against simply fixing errors and told to provide the tutee with strategies for correction. Informal

observation indicated the emergence of problems relating to the tutors' attempts to implement this advice. A study was designed to determine the ways in which tutees and tutors perceive the effectiveness of writing center tutorials when tutors who have been trained to use directive approaches are now trying to decide when and if they are appropriate. It takes into account the particular circumstances of a Middle Eastern university where the students come from ethically, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds to study in an English medium university. Unlike tutors in the US who are usually native speakers (NS) of English, the tutors at MEU are native speakers of languages such as Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, and English. Most writing center scholarship and research has been conducted with NS tutees, NNS tutees, and NS tutors in North America.

Research Questions

Many writing center researchers emphasize the importance of improving assessment practices and maintaining a willingness to question accepted notions of writing center pedagogy across the range of NS and NNS populations (Thonus, 2004; Williams & Severino, 2004). This study sought to understand and evaluate the effectiveness of the interactive process of the writing center tutorial by exploring tutor and tutee perceptions of the tutorials. Discerning patterns that recur during the sessions could lead to a deeper awareness of the perceptions of the tutors and the tutees, which will help the writing center director to improve the training of tutors and maximize the benefits of the Writing Center.

The following research questions were addressed within the given NNS context:

1. How do tutees perceive the effectiveness of writing center tutorials?
2. How do tutors perceive the effectiveness of writing center tutorials?
3. Which type of tutoring approach (e.g. non-directive vs. directive) do tutees find most effective?
4. Which type of tutoring approach (e.g. non-directive vs. directive) do tutors find most effective?

Methodology

Fifteen writing Center tutorials at the MEU Writing Center were videotaped and analyzed, and stimulated recall was conducted with the tutees and tutors within 24 hours after the tutorials. The stimulated recall was tape-recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted with all participants within 72 hours of the stimulated recall and were also transcribed. Data for the study came from videotapes of the tutorials, stimulated recall and interviews.

By coding the transcribed stimulated recall sessions and interviews with the tutors and tutees, the researcher was able to gain a clearer understanding of the following: tutors' and tutees' expectations of writing tutorials in general, their perceptions of the tutorials' effectiveness overall, and an understanding of which types of strategies (non-directive vs. directive) they felt were most effective.

Results

The findings revealed that tutees noticed an improvement in their assignments. They reported that their tutors addressed their concerns and that they had acquired transferable skills. Tutees appreciated and responded well to tutors who were able to explain concepts with clarity, accuracy and precision, but they were unsatisfied with tutors who dominated the session and with those who did not provide explanations for changes or corrections. They appreciated the authority of knowledgeable tutors, but they valued an egalitarian peer tutoring relationship.

Tutors also claimed that the tutorials were effective. They reported that the sessions improved their tutees' assignments and that they believed that the tutees had acquired transferable skills. Nevertheless, tutors were critical about their own performances. Some tutors admitted that their knowledge and understanding of certain writing concepts was insufficient; some felt they had dominated the tutorials, and others felt their approach was too directive. The data revealed that both tutors and tutees generally preferred a directive approach for lower order concerns and a non-directive approach for higher order concerns.

Though many of the findings of this study are similar to findings with NNS students in North American contexts, there are some differences. NNS tutees at all levels of proficiency in this study enjoyed the peer-like aspects of the relationship with their tutors. They appreciated having a sense of control over their tutorials and did not like their tutors to dominate tutorials. Like NNS tutees in North American contexts, the tutees in this context claimed that they preferred a directive approach for lower order concerns when they did not have sufficient knowledge to respond to their tutors' non-directive approaches.

Although there has been a greater emphasis in recent literature on the role of more directive strategies in writing center instruction (Bringhurst, 2006; Harris & Silva, 1993; Shamoon & Burns, 1995; Thonus, 2001, 2002, 2004; Williams, 2005), this study indicates that writing center practitioners should not abandon constructivist practices of collaboration and non-directive strategies; rather, they should use these strategies when it is appropriate to do so. The current evidence suggests that a combination of non-directive and directive practices may provide a solution to addressing the variety of learning needs exhibited by NNS writers in particular (Blau & Hall, 2002;

Carino, 2003; Harris & Silva, 1993; Henning, 2001; Shamoon & Burns, 2001; Thonus, 2001, 2002, 2004; Williams & Severino, 2004). This study confirms that the non-directive/directive binary alternatives are too simplistic to be helpful in practice because individuals with varying abilities and experiences need tutoring approaches that can be adapted to their requirements at different times. It emphasizes the importance of flexibility, of the judicious use of both directive and non-directive strategies.

This exploratory study reveals that strategies deemed successful with NS and NNS students in North American contexts may not be effective in Middle Eastern contexts. It raises questions about several well-established strategies in writing center tutorials. The strategy of silence, for instance, was generally not well received by tutees. Reading aloud, a strategy commonly used by many tutors, was also not well-received by several tutees. Determining the reasons for the tutees' negative assessment of these strategies warrants further research. Another finding is the tutees' preference for a peer tutoring, egalitarian relationship that enabled the generation of ideas through collaborative interaction and the strengths and limitations of this approach.

The difference between the students in this study and those in the North American context may be explained by their experiences living in and adapting to two or more cultures and languages. The findings of this study reveal the distinctive nature of this cohort and the implications this has for future research.

Implications of the Study

Although tutors and tutees claimed that the tutorial sessions were generally effective, the study shows that both groups were aware of aspects of the sessions that require alteration and improvement.

Emphasize the Importance of Pre-Tutorial Discussion

Tutees responded positively to tutors who spent time at the beginning of the tutorial asking questions about their assignments, their concerns and negotiating an agenda for the session. This aspect of tutorials could be emphasized during training, and tutors reminded of its importance throughout their employment at the Writing Center. This information gathering is particularly important for NNS tutees who may not be sufficiently fluent in English to understand the requirements of the assignments or to explain their own intentions about the assignment. Decisions about whether or not the tutee will read the text aloud or at what points during the reading the tutor will provide feedback could be made during this section of the tutorial.

This initial dialogue also gives the tutorial direction and establishes rapport between tutor and tutee. The study revealed that the tutoring relationship can be affected by many NNS students' unfamiliarity with the type of discussion that is typically used in the writing center. According to Bruce (2009), "the concept of shared responsibility for writing is alien" to NNS students (p. 34). This study confirmed her observation and affirmed the desirability of encouraging tutors to explain the writing center approach to first time clients at the beginning of the session and to implement it with sensitivity.

Avoid Appropriation

Although tutees preferred a directive approach while addressing lower order concerns, they were resistant to this approach if it bordered on appropriation. Several tutees reported that their tutors occasionally assumed too much control of their papers. This situation can be ameliorated if tutors have had adequate training so that they are aware of the need to involve their tutee in each stage of the discussion and to explain suggested changes. If the directive approach is used with sound judgment, it can provide the tutees with the conventions of discourse that are expected in academic institutions giving them more control over their writing.

When tutors were rushed and felt they did not have the time to explain adequately the reasons for their suggestions, the possibility of appropriation was heightened. In this situation, the tutee could be given a handout that specifically addresses the issues, directed to a relevant online site, or asked to make another appointment at the writing center at which time the specific problem could be addressed.

Tutors who have been trained to value the non-directive approach and to use directive approaches only when required find it difficult to know when to intervene with a directive approach, and how to determine the extent and the effect of their interventions. They lack the experience and the expertise to confidently negotiate this indeterminate area; moreover, they have acknowledged this difficulty and asked for guidance. Although tutors have misgivings about using the directive approach because of their training, some of them realize that it has proven to be effective on several occasions. If congenial learning situations were created where tutors could reflect on the teaching styles they are developing, perhaps they could change or modify them, if necessary. Activities such as role playing, stimulated recall or close vertical transcriptions, for instance, could help them to identify their characteristic teaching patterns and the resources they require in order be more confident and effective.

Provide in-Service Grammar Training

This study indicates that tutors' knowledge of grammar and related issues such as parts of speech, sentence structure and punctuation is insufficient. Grammar training throughout tutor training and with continuous professional development may be offered to tutors throughout their employment. In his article, "English for those who think they already know it," Rafoth (2009) says that successful tutoring sessions start with appropriate tutor resources and training, and argues that a familiarity with the framework of the English language "brings about more interesting and helpful interactions with the students we tutor" (p. 120). Tutors are not always able to explain the errors in the tutees' assignments. Brooks (1991) claims that "fixing flawed papers is easy; showing the students how to fix their own papers is complex and difficult" (p. 224).

Tutors who are able to identify the errors in grammar themselves and to access resources through handbooks and reliable online grammar sites, including interactive grammar sites may be better able to engage in a discussion with tutees about their papers. An understanding of grammar is one of the interrelated activities involved in writing, and once the basic grammatical elements are acquired, it would be useful to tutors to know how to access further details when they are required. In some instances NNS tutees may be more familiar with grammatical terminology than their tutors; therefore, knowledge of English grammar is a valuable tool for tutors, both to instruct their tutees, and to maintain their credibility as authorities on English writing. In addition to knowing how to access resources that explain rules of grammar, tutors could be offered workshops that focus on specific elements of grammar. Furthermore, reading student texts and discussing how to approach grammatical errors in the context of the assignment may help tutors feel more confident when addressing grammatical errors during tutorial sessions. Although tutors prepare a short grammar presentation during their peer tutoring course, this aspect of tutorials has not been emphasized during in-service training. The findings of this study reveal that a more detailed understanding of grammatical rules is necessary because the tutees requested information the tutors could not provide. If tutors have a more comprehensive understanding of lexical and syntactical aspects of grammar, they will be in a stronger position to help their tutees to achieve greater coherence, cohesion, clarity, and precision. Knowledge of grammar will enhance the students' ability to organize knowledge, to generate ideas and insights, and to develop persuasive arguments. Knowledge of grammar can form an important part of the recursive process of writing.

Provide Tutors with Information in Contrastive Rhetoric

Informal observation and the results of this study reveal that tutors do not engage their tutees in discussion about contrastive rhetoric. Raising learners' awareness of some of the basic differences between English and Arabic may help Arabic NS students, particularly low proficiency students, who did not attend English language high school. For example, the inclusion of a pronoun is required in relative clauses; in English, it is omitted. This tendency may result in errors such as "Where is the book which I gave *it* to you last week?" A tutor who notices that her tutee is including a pronoun in relative clauses would be expected to explain the difference. An understanding of contrastive rhetoric and an awareness of exemplary instances can form part of the tutors' arsenal, but tutors should not be constrained by the rhetoric of this approach because it can lead to prescriptivism. Many researchers caution against being prescriptive (Harris & Silva, 1993): an alternative to being prescriptive is to point out to writers the choices that are available to them, including the choices native speakers of English tend to make. Although tutors should be aware of characteristic instances of contrastive rhetoric, they should not pigeonhole Arabic NS students, for instance, by assuming they will make similar errors in their writing. In addition to providing tutors with readings in contrastive rhetoric, tutors could be provided with examples of students' writing and the opportunity to discuss characteristic errors made by Arabic, Persian, Urdu NS students, for instance.

Adopt a Flexible Approach to Tutoring

This study shows that more flexible tutoring models that accommodate the experiences of our tutors and tutees and their particular strengths and weaknesses may be of value. Much of the writing center scholarship discussing NNS writers recommends more flexible tutoring models than those used with NS writers (Blau & Hall, 2002; Thonus, 2001, 2002, 2004; Williams, 2005; Williams & Severino, 2004). The results of this Middle Eastern study support a similar recommendation. Pedagogical models designed to accommodate NNS students in North American contexts provide valuable insights about the relation between writing and learning. Middle Eastern writing center studies can build on this body of research and develop approaches that are flexible in ways that take into account the particularities of our clientele.

It is up to writing center directors, however, to be aware of writing center pedagogy as it evolves in response to research; tutors should be able to assume that advice from directors is based on such research. If this level of confidence is established, tutors may be less inclined to regard established writing center models as prescriptive and more inclined to be flexible and to take into account the disparate needs of the tutees. The study revealed, for instance, that the reading aloud strategy occasionally distracted the tutees' attention rather than focusing it. Future tutors will be trained to take this into account and to recognize that this change in strategy derives not from personal preference but from research. It cannot automatically be assumed that the strategy of reading aloud or other strategies will work with all tutees in all situations.

Promote an Egalitarian Tutorial Relationship

The peer aspect of tutorials was deemed effective by both tutors and tutees. Tutees want access to authoritative, reliable knowledge in a friendly, egalitarian atmosphere. They claimed that they liked their tutors to involve them in the discussions as much as possible. Tutors have been trained not to control and dominate the conversation, but both sets of data revealed that many had a tendency to do so. In order to make tutors aware of this tendency and of the importance of involving the tutee in the session in meaningful ways, it is necessary to draw attention to that weakness in their tutorials. It is important to promote an atmosphere of collegial collaboration so that tutors will be self-critical and willing to accept helpful suggestions. Involving tutors in self-observation so they can be aware of conversational elements such as interruptions, turn length, timed pauses, back-channels, and overlaps may help tutors notice patterns and detrimental practices in their tutoring. This study used stimulated recall activities following a recorded tutorial session. The enlightened self-criticism that was generated suggests that this method can promote an egalitarian tutorial relationship by providing a context whereby the tutors can see and hear themselves in action.

Conclusion

Writing center directors should be receptive to emerging research in order to continue to evolve standards of best practice. Insights derived from research and scholarship indicate the need for additional, clear-sighted research that takes into account the actual working conditions of writing centers in different countries. The tutors who are expected to be knowledgeable, flexible and sensitive to individual needs are often students themselves. They are students from a variety of disciplines who have excellent academic records and an interest in writing and tutoring. It is unreasonable, however, to assume that their education encompasses the breadth of knowledge that is required to meet the needs of individual students in the Writing Center. It is the responsibility of the writing center specialists or directors to be familiar with traditional and contemporary writing center theories and to be part of the ongoing discourse about writing in order to recognize the viability of particular strategies and the possibility of adapting them, in this case, to the requirements of a Middle Eastern university writing center.

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