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Dominance in Writing Center Tutorials for ESL Students

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Abstract

The review aims to explore and investigate the writing center pedagogies and clientele and dominant interaction during tutorial sessions with ESL students. The writing center's primary goal is to help students to better their writing. Thus, writing conferences between tutors and tutees should be centered upon the writing process and the conference (Bell and Elledge, 2008). However, due to diverse linguistic and other influencing background factors of its frequenters, several writing center pedagogies may not be able to meet the competing needs of its ESL clients and thus, leads to the occurrence of dominance during sessions. Therefore, this article targets to shed lights on this particular writing center dynamic by conducting a comprehensive review, analysis, and synthesis of linguistic interactions utilizing referred and non-referred publications literature surrounding the notion of the writing center, its pedagogies as well as its clientele, and linguistic dominance within tutorial interactions between tutors and their ESL tutees. The findings reveal that while dominance may impede learning, it also benefits the tutees in terms of providing clearness and reinforcing learning. In response to these findings, this review concludes that keeping up-to-date with the ever changing pedagogies in accommodating the needs of ESL students with divergent backgrounds is crucial for the improvement of the writing center philosophy and practices.

Keywords: Writing Center, Writing Center Pedagogies, Dominance, Tutorial Session, ESL/EFL writers

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1. Introduction

Typically, each educational institution at secondary or college levels provides their own writing center which is varied in terms of shapes, sizes, and settings (Harris, 1988). These writing centers, beginning as writing labs in the 1930s, are now pivotal in their roles in assisting students in improving their writing-related skills. In the current situation, where the number of English as a Second Language (ESL) students continues to rise and the students' need to produce coherent academic writing in English, ESL or EFL lecturers feel conflicted every time they face their students. These ESL writers who are still struggling to write in a language they have not yet mastered may seek help concerning global issues as well as surface level features. In higher institutions, writing center services are available for clients of all levels. Ideally, the writing center conference is oriented towards producing "better writers". Thus, the conference is designed in such ways that both tutor and tutee are expected to work collaboratively during writing consultation. However, many writing center pedagogies administered by the tutors may not work effectively when consulting ESL writers, thus resulting in linguistic dominance during conferences. In this review, the writer presents interactional dominance in conferences with ESL writers, the perceptions of tutors and tutees towards dominance, and its impacts. In addition, the implication of the dominant act will be addressed.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze and investigate using available and relevant literature on the concept of dominance in tutorial conferences with ESL writers. In particular, it aims to look closely at how dominance in the writing conferences is perceived and how this dominant behavior affects its related population. Thus, the objectives of this article are oriented to answer the following questions:

1. How are the pedagogies and clientele of the writing center?
2. How is dominance perceived in the writing center tutorials?
3. What are the implications of implementing linguistic dominance in the writing center tutorials with ESL students?

3. Methodology

The method for this study was a comprehensive review, analysis, and synthesis surrounding the notion of the writing center, its pedagogies, its clientele, and the linguistic dominance within the tutorials. To ensure relevant studies were located in order to complete a comprehensive and integrative review of the literature surrounding linguistic dominance in the tutorial interactions between the tutors and the tutees, the writer completed an exhaustive review of referred and non-referred publications. This comprehensive review utilized literature and research available on the online education databases and journal articles of Marshall library and other reliable sources including ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Research Gate in which keywords such as writing center, writing center pedagogies, dominance, tutoring session, and EFL/ESL writers were accessed.

The discussion of this paper will be divided into three parts: the first section discusses the overview of the writing center and its pedagogies and clientele; the second section points out the conflicting point of views toward dominance; the third portion of the essay discusses the resulting impacts of dominance in the writing center sessions; and lastly, some recommendations are proposed.

4. Discussion and Findings

4.1 Writing Center, Its Pedagogies and Its ESL Clientele: An Overview

Students at higher levels of education are required to draw on particular work and create a formal writing text. In its implementation, it is easier said than done as writing is a complex and tedious process. As defined by Dyson and Freedman (2003), writing is a convoluted thinking process in reference to the government of many skills. In order to help students with their writing, typically, each educational institution at secondary or college levels facilitate students' learning with learning resources, such as a writing center. Writing center aims to serve the entire population of the institution who are in need of assistance concerning their writing. In serving individuals visiting the writing center, tutors who are employed range from undergraduate peer tutors, graduate students, part-time or full-time, and professionals (Harris, 1988; Thonus, 1999). These tutors receive training in facilitating and assisting writers during their writing process rather than direct students' writing and fix their surface level errors (Bell & Elledge, 2008). The tutors have many roles and these roles are adjusted based on the tutees' needs. The tutors' roles as listed by Ryan & Zimmerelli (2006) are the ally, the coach, the commentator, the collaborator, the writing "expert", and the counselor.

In writing consultations with tutees, the writing center pedagogy supposes that those who consult writing center can express what they intend to write, communicate well in English, respond to tutors' questions concerning their writing, identify what should be put on paper and whatnot, and put emphasis on global revisions rather than local ones. These tutorial interactions between the tutors and their tutees focus on an individual (the student writer) and on a product (the writing) the individual is trying to create. This is not meant for evaluation as the tutors' task is only to help students to become autonomous writers which eventually can assess their own writing process and product. As trained, the tutors' roles when consulting a student consist of listening actively, acting as a reader, and providing silence and time for the tutee (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2006). All these efforts are executed to achieve the writing center's objective, which is to manufacture "better writers" and not "better writing" (North, 1984). Having other people, in this case, tutors, read the texts can benefit the ESL learners in developing "a sense of audience" (Nation, 2009), a sense defined by Britton et al. (1975) as the way the writer conveys a message to the audience with reference to his own interpretation of things. This audience-awareness will help writers to relate to their audience as they craft their texts, which further facilitates them to be better and autonomous writers. Tutors, while

still deemed to be less authoritative considering their status which is lower in the university academic ladder, are perceived to have similar skills owned by the instructors. Hence, tutors are viewed to be able to help tutees achieve provisions set by their instructors, and thus, writers interact differently with the tutors compared to their instructors (Harris, 1995).

Writing center clientele consists of Native Speakers of English (NSE) and Non-Native Speakers of English (NNSE). Since the focus of this essay is to examine the latter, the following will mainly discuss the multilingual clientele. Leki (2009, 2004) sorts multilingual writers into 3 categories: undergraduate students which are US high school alumni, international or undergraduate students who are on a student visa and planning to return to their home countries upon completion of their study, and international graduate students or professionals. This assortment is somewhat different from the classification proposed by Thonus (2003). While Leki's classification emphasizes the writer's educational status, Thonus categorizes them based on their linguistics performance. Thonus classifies these multilingual writers into three categories: NNSE writers who have English as their second (or foreign) language and are (still) learning English as their second language; NNSE writers who have just emigrated to the US and have an L1-based educational background; and Generation 1.5 learners who have resided in the US for a lengthy period of time and have been fluent in English. Another way to classify these students is to base it on their initial contact with English. Some of these ESL writers come from countries where English is one of its primary languages such as Nigeria, India, Papua New Guinea; some originate from countries where English is not widely spoken such as Russia, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Laos.

Furthermore, these students can also be sorted depending on their proficiency in English. According to Matsuda and Cox, these ESL learners may be fluent in speaking but lacking in writing, some may be proficient in writing but have low English speaking ability, and some may fall in between the two categories (2009, 2004). Being aware of the differences of the ESL learners' background and linguistic features is essential before delving into the approaches and materials to help them cope with the academic setting in the English speaking classroom. These ESL students experience learning differently from native speakers of English who are not foreign to the language they have used since their birth (Gibbons, 2015). Therefore, while the writing center requires its clientele to actively participate during the session as its main purpose is to help students become self-activator of meaning-making and independent assessor of their writing, the tutors may encounter the conflicting reality which results in the dominant interaction between the tutors and tutees in the writing center.

To sum up, the writing center's goal is to help its clients to become better writers by assisting the students in addressing global and local concerns. However, the diversity in terms of language use and knowledge and the educational and socioeconomic backgrounds may lead to dominance when consulting these ESL students who experience and learn English differently from their fellow students who are native speakers of English.

4.2 Dominance in the Writing Center Tutorials

4.2.1 Dominance within conferences of ESL students

In any context, the word 'dominance' exudes power and authority. Similarly, in the writing center context, dominance also refers to the implication of power and authority. Specifically, it reflects in the oral exchanges between the tutors and the tutees during the writing center tutorials. As defined by Bell and Elledge, dominance is a way to exert power by controlling the language through which communication occurs (2008). This means dominance is performed by ones who hold the power in the verbal communications between the speakers, in this case, the tutors and the tutees.

This concept, as recent studies have shown, is more frequently applied with the EFL tutees than the non-English speaking clients. Powers (1993) argued that in handling ESL tutees who are different in terms of educational, rhetorical, cultural, and linguistics backgrounds, the tutors play more of directive and didactic roles during tutoring sessions. Thonus's (1999, 2002, 2004) findings show a similar recurring design of tutors' dominant behavior with their EFL clients. She asserts that dominant individuals have access to power through control over properties such as turn taking, topic selection, and style (1999). These characteristics are quite similar to what Thonus had found. Thonus (2004) summarized six signs of tutors' dominance in the tutorial sessions: the tutors talking longer than the tutees, mitigating less (use more modals and imperatives), using less extended negotiation sequence, taking charge, holding the floor, and dominating the interaction. Such a concept is also revealed by Williams (2008). She supports the idea that dominance manifests in the form of turn-length, directives, interruptions, and unmitigated suggestions. Bell and Elledge contend the concept and propose time-at-talk, turn-taking, agenda setting, and session content as the dominant indicators of the tutors during writing conferences (2008). In their research in

reference to dominance in peer tutorings, tutor's dominance can be seen over the topics, the content, and development of the students' writing (Severino, 2009, 2004).

In brief, dominance occurs when one of the two parties involved holds power and authority over the other and as consequent, has the upper hand in deciding what to do, what to discuss, and how to structure the interaction, in this case, the tutoring interaction between the tutors and the tutees. The aforementioned interaction is perceived differently by the writing center tutors and the tutees.

4.2.2 Perception toward Dominance

Decisions to visit the writing center may be voluntary as the need to visit does not only come from the students themselves as it may also be mandatory. The instructors may send the students to the writing center because they feel the students need to improve their writing skills (Williams, 2002, p. 74) or they simply think their classes are not meant to teach English writing convention or grammar-related concern. Thus, sending the students seems to be a better option. The interactions between the students and the tutors differ from those with the instructors. In handling the tutees, the tutors may have different expectations when interacting with these non-native English speaking students as they think they only need to draw out what the students already know (Thonus, 2004, p. 228), or they have this expectation that students are aware of the English writing convention (Power, 1993, p. 41). While good feedback and revision pedagogies emphasize that their writing advising sessions as a joint effort between the advisers and the advisees, the tutors may not be able to implement their know-how in the said session and opt to use one last effort which displays linguistic dominance.

As mentioned above, the writing center's core values emphasize the effective collaboration between tutors and tutees. The tutors know that being good tutors means they ask questions about the students' work, goals, and process (Crowley, 2001). They are trained to tend to students' concerns from both global perspectives and local concerns. The former is prioritized during the sessions while the latter is addressed once the issues that are considered urgent have been addressed; therefore, the tutors' agenda on what to work on may differ from the tutees' immediate needs. This leads to linguistic dominance which inevitably occurs during the sessions and becomes a tricky situation for the tutors. The tutors may perceive 'holding the floor' (the tutor controls the floor in his interaction with the tutee) and 'a more of one-way communication' (the tutor dominates while the tutee exhibits fewer responses, more backchanneling, and less laughter) hinder tutors from the writing center ultimate goals (to help students to be better writers). This pattern, however, is something that the tutees are welcomed to. Thonus (2002) states that the 'authority and expertise' employed by the tutor are things which are expected and 'not openly negotiated' by the tutees. The tutees turn to the tutors because they are viewed as authoritative figures. What may spark this phenomenon is because of the "Native-speaker privilege" (Phillipson, 1992). In the writing center where both NSE and NNSE tutors are available, many tutees prefer to consult native English-speaking tutors who are considered to have best knowledge concerning English grammar and pronunciation" (Rafoth, 2015). The reasons for this fixation may be caused by ESL students' lack knowledge of English structure, their "over focus" to have a perfect language structure due to the nature of their previous educational system experience, or as Bruce (2009, 2004) states, they want assurance that their produced sentences sound like Native Speakers' wordings. Thus, having native speaker tutors "fix" their writing to sound "native-like" is what they consider as the best solution. Another reason for this dominant behavior is because the tutor's feedback is viewed as effective as teacher's feedback (Williams, 2002). These situations result in their preference of the tutors to be authoritative (William & Soverino, 2004). The tutors are also perceived as more: helpful, approachable, practical, and personal (Harris, 1997). Thus, a tutor's dominant behavior in tutorial situations may have been perceived as something common by the Non-Native English speaking tutees as they view tutors as the authoritative role.

Although dominance is welcomed by the ESL clients, it may cause an internal conflict for the tutors. Being a dominant participant is a role they think the tutees should take. However, there are many things that need to be taken into consideration while handling ESL clients, such as students' oral fluency versus their writing fluency and their cultural awareness. Since the writing center pedagogies focus on helping the students to become better writers, the tutors tend to address the higher order concern such as content and organization issues instead of local concern issues in the beginning of the tutorial sessions. Such action also indicates linguistic dominance as the tutors are in the power of choosing what needs to be addressed.

The distribution of power and authority in the writing center, however, is not solely performed by the tutors. Thonus argues that dominance resides not in the individual but in speech situations that confer status and authority (2004). The tutoring sessions show that the tutees possess dominant attitudes and hold power over the advice they are given. The writing center is perceived to not only provide supplementary instruction but also often as a site of primary learning (Williams, 2002); however, after the tutoring sessions, the tutees have options to choose suggestions they could follow (Williams, 2002). Also, Williams reconfirms later that the tutees have the power to decide, to acknowledge, or to ignore the suggestions provided by the tutors (2008). This is possibly due to their perceptions of tutors as peer students who possess no better knowledge than them (Williams, 2002). The ESL students' perception of what the writing service offers also plays a crucial role within the tutoring interactions. More often than not, the ESL clients visit the writing center to have their grammar 'fixed'. This may affect the tutors' decision in addressing the existing concerns in the students' writing. The students' misconception of the writing center services or its lack thereof may influence the tutors to address the issues intended by the tutees, which does not adhere to the core values of the writing center. Another reason for this situation is the time constraints which force the tutors to prioritize addressing the L2 writers' intended concern (Williams and Soverino, 2004). This is often caused by the tutees who visit the writing center when their due date is just around the corner resulting in the more local concern focused session. The exertion of power by the tutees is also shown by how the tutees control what to discuss. Bell and Elledge's findings demonstrate that the tutees could also exhibit a linguistic dominance by setting the agenda and determining the content of the session (2008). Although the tutors' training may have prepared the tutors to implement the Writing Center pedagogy in which the global concern needs first and foremost treatment, the tutees who have different needs and concerns regarding their writing will try to shift the topic or lead the conversation to the local concerns. Also, while the tutors are trained to guide tutees while still ensuring their authorship (Thonus, 2004), the tutors who face "competing needs" of the tutees may give in and simply tell the tutees what they do not know.

Having described several perceptions toward dominance, it can be concluded that there are conflicting points of view regarding the act of dominance performed within the tutorial sessions. In order to shed more light on the subject, the arguments below will discuss the implication of performing dominance in the tutorial interactions between tutors and their clients.

4.2.3 The Impact of Dominance

Dominance can be perceived as problematic. While it serves to eliminate misunderstandings with the ESL clients, it limits the essential process of negotiation of meaning. Negotiation allows the tutors and the tutees to meet halfway in order to reach comprehension thus resulting in the increased comprehension of input (Williams, 2002). During the process of negotiation of meaning between the tutors and the tutees, the students are allowed to derive knowledge from their negotiation process with the tutors to achieve comprehension. In addition, based on Jacobs and Karliner's (1977) findings, students who were more actively initiating conversation in writing conferences with their instructors concerning their paper proved to be able to produce more in-depth analysis for their revisions. Thus, such affordances will be denied or interrupted when tutors simply tell the tutees what to do, what to add, and what to delete.

Despite the drawbacks it may cause, dominance can be seen as necessary in writing center sessions. According to Nash (2006), being inexplicit may lead to confusion for students who are unable to decipher the real intention of the tutors when giving questions or suggestions. The line needs to be crossed when the tutors assume that less concerning issues such as interwoven word choices should be dealt with immediately so that a more substantial concern can be addressed (Rafoth, 2015). When examining students' writing, the tutors need to figure out the prominent issue faced by the students. Is the issue because the students are lacking in terms of sentence structure or vocabulary range? Or is it simply because they have no idea what to write and/or how to start/write it? Regardless of what the concern is, the tutors are faced with the competing and immediate need within the sessions and the tutees may need to be told directly if their writing contains errors, especially if it results in the loss or the lack of clarity. In addition to that, it is important to note that providing meta-cognitive feedback will be positively welcomed if the students' proficiency in English has been above basic. Although being directives is not ideal, as revealed by Thompson & Mackiewicz (2014) that tutors' questions are supposed to provide indirect guidance for the writers to encourage improved writing, it is deemed necessary if the tutors want to earn the tutees' trust and to build a good rapport with them. It is important to remember that these

students see their tutors as a cultural informant rather than a collaborator (Powers, 1993). They expect tutors to provide “inside information” (Crowley, 2001) where they could ask for assistance, an insider point of view regarding their writing. Coming from a different culture and custom and facing challenges to learn a new language while learning to write in the said language, the tutees need to find comfort in the tutors who are equipped with the knowledge that patience and empathy can help build a tutor-client relationship (Crowley, 2001). This open attitude to receiving feedback from the writing tutors who are trained to address both organization and sentence level concerns may result in the success of the students’ development as better writers.

In brief, the dominance in the writing center is viewed to have drawbacks. However, it is also perceived to benefit the tutees and considered necessary when under particular circumstances. Hence, in order to find potential positive outcomes when dealing with ESL students in the writing center tutorings, some suggestions are offered in the following section.

4.3 Arguments for Further Improvement of Tutorial Interactions with ESL Students in the Writing Center

In this part, some recommendations are proposed for the improvement of the writing center conferences, specifically in dealing with dominance within ESL conferences.

Firstly, it is essential to find pedagogies which can better cater to ESL students with varied personal life and learning experiences and proficiency concerning English. Many writing center pedagogies are intended for the native English speaking tutees. Thus, the needs for the tutors to look at the texts globally do not meet the ESL students’ expectation as EFL teaching practices, as referred by Harris and Silva (1993), are more often teacher centered and emphasize more on the form (and less on the content). Many of these students perceive dominance as a regular occurrence in the academic setting and thus, are not against it and even encourage it. This, however, may not be ideal in the long run as tutees need to be challenged continuously and gradually.

Secondly, as the writing consultation provided by the writing center is fundamental for ESL writers, it needs to be handled by tutors who are well informed and updated in the field of composition as well as of these ESL learners. This is prominent because these students’ familiarity with English differs from native speakers of English who have been in contact with English since birth. Due to the differences in the ESL learners’ background and linguistic features, they see the writing process and product differently. They think of their mechanics as the most important because that is what is mainly taught in many English programs. Secondly, many composition instructors “have this expectation that students are aware of the English writing convention” (Powers, 1993, p. 41). Many instructors presume that these ESL learners, due to having been accepted as students in English speaking universities, have mastered the standard use of spoken and written English. Therefore, the tutors’ roles also need to extend to closing the gap between the instructors and the students.

Finally, promotions of what the writing center provides and expects from those visiting the writing center need to be continuously conducted. North (1984) argues that the writing center tutorial is collaborative. However, collaboration relies on the common perspective shared by both tutors and tutees. Therefore, there need to be continuous efforts in familiarizing the students to what the writing center mainly aims to achieve, which is to work collaboratively with students in order to help them to be a better writer and their self-assessor of their own texts. In addition, international students originating from countries outside the US, Canada, and European countries such as the UK and Italy are likely foreign to the concept of writing center and the services it provides.

5. Conclusion

All in all, the occurrence of dominance may be triggered by several contributing factors. After perusing accessible and pertinent literature discussing writing center, its educational framework, its frequenters, with the focus on the linguistic dominance within tutorial sessions with its multilingual frequenters, it was found that there have been many factors affecting the ESL writers’ writing such as educational background, the length of their stay in the English speaking countries, and other factors. Writing Center provides the assistance needed to help lessen the burden in writing adhering to English writing conventions. Although dominant behaviors of tutors in the writing center may cause issues, they also benefit students in terms of writing and self-assessment skills. Understanding what dominance may bring into the tutoring sessions may help the tutors to navigate their linguistic choice in addressing the students’ concerns while still promoting effective collaboration as well as enhancing comprehension of the ESL tutees. To help improve the writing conferences with the tutees, it is argued that to improve

tutorial interaction in the writing center, there is a need to find, adapt, and adopt the best approaches to help ESL students. In addition, tutors are in constant need to be up and above and continuously updated with the “still-evolving” writing center pedagogies to improve the quality of the writing conferences. Also, promotions to introduce and familiarize the writing services should be frequently done to ensure clearness of what to bring and what to expect when arranging a session in the writing center.

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