

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

by Frances Nan

## **About the Author**

Frances Nan graduated in May from Pomona College in Claremont, CA, where she double majored in English Literature and Philosophy/Politics/Economics. She spent the best three of the last four years working for the Pomona College Writing Center. Next, she plans to teach fourth grade at Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary School in Houston, TX.

As the population of international—and particularly Chinese—students grows in US academic institutions, it is critical that writing center tutors be able to address these students’ needs. However, whereas writing tutors at my institution are often taught to be indirect and focus on higher order concerns, such strategies are not always practical for working with English Language Learners (ELL), who may have writing experiences different from those of native speakers or may have brought perceptions of tutor-tutee roles from their home countries. This essay therefore focuses on suggestions that tutors might consider bringing to their work with Chinese ELL students during “writing partner consultations,” my institution’s term for weekly, one-on-one meetings between a writer and the same writing tutor for the entirety of the semester. Effective writing partnerships are particularly useful when working with Chinese-native writers, for they allow tutors and writers to focus on both individual papers and long-term improvement. By drawing upon a literature review and a study of two writing partner dyads over a semester, I conclude that the level of understanding, directness, and transparency between tutor and student affect the success of writing

partnerships. By incorporating such suggestions into tutor training, I believe writing partnerships between tutors and ELL writers can improve.

The population of international students increases annually on US college campuses, and Chinese international students comprise the largest group of international students (Inst. of Intl. Educ.). Based on my review of the literature, the training for leading one-on-one consultations at my institution which prioritizes asking leading questions and “hedging” may not be as effective for ELL consultations as with native speakers. By “hedging,” I mean speech that “uses terms that soften the message such as *maybe, might, kind of, could possibly,*” rather than direct speech in imperative forms: hedging would sound like, “You might want to make all your verbs past tense” rather than, “Put all verbs in the past tense” (Baker 76). Second, as a result of the language barrier, when working with non-native writers, tutors may feel more limited in what they say, how they say it, and even in their body language. Nevertheless, there are suggestions tutors can implement before and during the appointment to help ELL writers to feel comfortable and engaged, to understand what is going on, and to be motivated to continue revising post-consultation. At the same time that I want to add to our knowledge of these cross-cultural exchanges, I hope my attention to two individual pairings helps erase any blurred misconceptions and mutual misinformation among Chinese ELL writers and the writing center.

In the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years, during which my study was conducted, new international student enrollment in undergraduate colleges nationwide increased 6.5 percent, from 79,365 to 84,543, continuing a general upward trend since 2004-05 (Inst. of Intl. Educ.). In 2009-11, China was also the leading place of origin for international students. The population of undergraduate Chinese international students increased 42.7 percent, from 39,921 to 56,976, while graduate student enrollment increased 15.6 percent, from 66,453 to 76,830 (Inst. of Intl. Educ.). While previous articles are ambiguous about the exact number of ELL students who visit writing centers (see, for example, Griffin et al. 16), the increasing population of international, ELL students reflects a forthcoming study’s conclusion that at least at one large public, one medium

private, and one small liberal arts college, writing centers “see more ELL students than their campus demographics would suggest” (Bromley et al.). To best help and remain relevant to the needs of this expanding group, it is important to learn to address the expectations and challenges ELL student writers face compared to native speakers.

For context, this study took place at a highly selective liberal arts college. On our campus, the peer tutoring writing center is the sole support center for ELL writers. During the 1,189 appointments in the 2010–11 school year, all writers were asked to complete an evaluation of the writing center and 28 percent ( $n=330$ ) did so. Of the writers that completed the survey, 15 percent reported that English is *not* their first language, while 19 percent reported that English is one of their first languages. I interviewed the tutors and freshman Chinese ELL writers in two of the eleven writing partnerships during the fall semester, seven of which were with freshmen and three of which were with Chinese ELL students. Based on these demographics, it is clear that freshmen and Chinese students make up a large part of our institution’s writing partnerships.

In this essay, I combine existing theory and research with my individual interviews to arrive at specific, useful advice about comportment and interaction. First, I address issues that tutors should be aware of prior to consultations and offer suggestions about how to run their initial consultations in order to present these issues openly. Then I describe what tutors and writers might address in their partnerships and methods of follow up and evaluation.

## **Key Considerations for Tutors to Address with Chinese Writers**

Before their first consultations, tutors can better prepare by exploring the cultural differences between themselves and the writers with whom they work and by considering how these differences affect their writing consultations.

## *Writing Experience*

In general, Chinese international students arrive at college from high schools with very different standards of writing (Scordaras 190). The two Chinese ELL writers that I interviewed said they arrived at college with little knowledge of American writing, and their peers probably “have similar high school experiences” (Zhu, 28 Sept.). One writer received his only introduction to writing in English through preparing for standardized tests such as the TOEFL and SAT (Zhang, 5 Oct.). While the latter demands five paragraph essays, the TOEFL asks for a paragraph of 500 to 600 words maximum (Zhang, 5 Oct.) in response to sample prompts such as, “Would you agree/disagree that parents are the best teachers?” or “Would you agree/disagree that television has destroyed communication among friends and family?” and to be written in 30 minutes (Educational Testing Service).

As Myers writes, Chinese ELL students “may have ‘studied’ English . . . in their home countries, but that ‘study’ may have consisted of rote memorization of isolated words in vocabulary lists and ‘grammar’ tests” (287). In the words of an ELL writer, English classes in Chinese high schools are “so easy” (Zhang, 5 Oct.), and “grammar practices [were] multiple choice questions [that were] pretty easy” (Zhu, 28 Sept.). A typical writing prompt would read something like, “Write a letter to your friend in the United States describing how you feel about your courses this semester,” with a 200 word maximum (Zhang, 5 Oct. 2010). In the US, such prompts would be found in a first semester university-level foreign language course. Therefore, there is an obvious lack of preparation among many ELL students when it comes to composing the argumentative, highly analytical essays that their college courses demand.

In addition to struggling with academic assignments in American universities, Chinese ELL writers may be unfamiliar with negotiating the difference between the Chinese and US structure and style of argumentation. In terms of content, an essay in Chinese may have many or no arguments: one Chinese writer described how prompts in China asked him to analyze a metaphor, and the teacher expected his essay to interpret the poem from different angles, such as how the poet wrote the poem or how the metaphor can be applied to life. Graders in China are more concerned with the beauty of a

student's language—his or her ability to “employ some flowery words to make [the writing] fancy” and his or her ability to demonstrate extensive knowledge about Chinese literature and culture (Zhu, 28 Sept.). Thus, citing “a lot of ancient poems [would] give you a lot of advantage” in a Chinese classroom (Zhang, 5 Oct.). One tutor observed that, for his writing partner, forming an argument that “goes a step further” than what he had read in class “was a really new concept for him [in contrast to China, where teachers] ask you to play within the boundaries [of] what's already in the canon” (Demski, 2 Dec.). In China, there is obviously more of an emphasis on synthesizing other authors' works, compared to the US focus on making unique arguments.

The US writing style emphasizes a strict point-evidence-explain structure, as well as original thinking and creative engagement with multiple academic sources. In contrast, Chinese essay writers do not state their thesis until the end so that readers realize the author's intention themselves (Zhang, 5 Oct.). Minett, paraphrasing Hinds, writes, English writing is “reader friendly in its directness and clarity” (66). Chinese writing, like the Japanese style that Minett and Hinds discuss, can be described as “*writer* friendly [since] it's mainly the reader's job to determine the writers intention” and to “anticipate with pleasure the opportunities that such writing offers them” (Hinds qtd. in Minett 66). The rationale behind the Chinese method of writing is best described as a “spiral” —one likes to “talk around” a point before arriving at the “center” (i.e., one's thesis). Consequently, writers put their thesis at the end of a paragraph or paper (Zhu, “The Article”). For example, whereas a sentence in English may state outright that “soccer is a difficult sport” and then describe reasons why, in Chinese, the descriptions would come before the conclusion that soccer is difficult (“英汉表达差异”). ELL students' contrastive rhetoric, namely “the ways that cultures differ in their expectations about rhetorical patterns or logical organization of a text,” may heavily influence how ELL students write in English (Hayward qtd. in Bruce 228). Thus, they may be unprepared for the US focus on innovative arguments in a direct writing style.

### *Perceptions of Tutor-Tutee Roles*

Chinese ELL writers may misunderstand how much authority their tutors have; many come from diverse cultures with “rules of speaking that may conflict with those of US classrooms, [which influences] the students’ perceptions of their and their teachers’ roles in a conference” (Goldstein and Conrad 456). Such students may have preconceived notions about how to approach conferences with someone seen as an authority (Goldstein and Conrad 457). For instance, students may be accustomed to dynamics wherein the teacher initiates and questions (Goldstein and Conrad 456), and the student responds or is not allowed to ask questions. If a student believes she or he cannot or should not argue with the tutor, he or she may feel uncomfortable questioning suggested revisions, which could lead to further misunderstanding.

### **Suggestions for Improving ELL Writing Partnerships**

Tutors themselves must have a meta-awareness of their consultation style to be able to work effectively with ELL writers. Like teachers, tutors must be aware that their (mis)informed assumptions about a writer’s ability may influence how the conference is run. Once tutors observe writers’ behaviors, and subconsciously behave “in ways consistent with [their] expectations” (Goldstein and Conrad 456), they may accept less participation from these writers from the beginning of their writing partnership, without allowing writers to showcase just how active they could be. Second, a tutor should not be “blinded by the [tutor’s] own conference objectives . . . regardless of the [writer’s] reactions” (Han 259). In other words, sometimes tutors may be so concerned about improving their partner’s paper that they forget that it is their partner’s paper, not their own.

ELL writers must understand the slow process that writing partnerships may take and that tutors as well as ELL writers themselves should prioritize higher order concerns, rather than focusing on those lower order concerns for which professors may penalize them more heavily. Some tutors tell their partners from the

beginning that their partnership will be a long-term progression, wherein they may not be able to immediately fix everything in every essay (Goldman, 29 Sept.). In order to keep one's position credible, the tutor should be clear that, whereas the writer's professor will be grading the essay compared to the writer's peers, the tutor will focus solely on helping the writer develop.

### *Assess Where the Writer Is Now*

A tutor attempting to develop a course of action for a semester-long writing partnership should set aside the task of examining individual papers and instead ask the writer how much he or she knows about US academic writing. Rather than sermonizing *at* the writer on the difference between US and Chinese writing styles, the tutor should gauge the writer's level of knowledge by transforming the session into a collaborative, questioning one: "What do *you* think a thesis statement is in college writing?" As one tutor noted, tutors must understand that they may have to begin "from the foundations [or] spend the first month going through, 'What is a paper in a US college? What are they asking for? What are the different pieces of a paper? And here's why [US professors expect] you to do these things'" (Demski, 2 Dec.). In this way, tutors can assess their writing partner's background in writing.

### *Be Direct*

Tutors must be direct in order for ELL writers to realize that they too can shape the consultation. Tutors in my writing center are taught that indirectness—e.g., asking leading questions, allowing writers to say what they think rather than tutors thinking for them—will help writers learn better because it allows them to learn from their own mistakes. However, for ELL writers, more initial direction may be necessary. Tutors, like teachers, should "suspend politeness (indirect speech acts and hedging) in favor of clarity (direct speech acts) when working with non-native speakers of English" (Baker 77).

Tutors must be prepared to first make direct changes for writers while modeling specific examples before expecting them to flourish under the usual indirection. ELL writers "need to get a sense of

what such texts look like and ‘sound’ like” (Myers 298), since they are often less familiar than native writers with what is expected. One tutor found when he was “very generous with examples,” his writing partner could “hear archetypes, such as how to use words like ‘however,’ ‘in addition,’ or ‘by contrast’” (Goldman, 30 Nov.). Similarly, an ELL writer was adamant that tutors should be direct rather than indirect: he seemed confused to hear that tutors expected writers to know what to correct without being told. When I posited the fear in existing literature that writers would become too dependent on tutors to point out their errors, he shook his head and said, “Still you should point out, and then correct it, and then next time I’ll know what word to use. . . . Because, *I don’t know*, I actually don’t know, so I wouldn’t come up with an idea” (Zhang, 4 Dec.). As Myers writes, “if [ELL writers] don’t have the appropriate word or lexical phrase, no editing will provide it” (291). Therefore, tutors should feel comfortable taking a more direct approach with ELL writing partners.

### *Be Transparent*

At the same time, transparency is still important: ELL writers must know what to expect of the writing consultation dynamic. With explicit direction, tutors must also include their reasons. Instead of beating around the bush, tutors should, depending on their assessment of an individual writer’s reaction, be honest. As one tutor described, a tutor should remember that, “a sentence is never just ‘bad,’ it’s ‘bad because’” (Goldman, 29 Sept.). Han suggests that transparency from the tutor will encourage the ELL writer to direct the consultation by increasing the writer’s “metacognitive awareness” about consultation strategies (Han 258). Tutors need to show ELL writers that tutors are certainly not perfect when it comes to giving suggestions or running consultations and that writers are encouraged to make suggestions or queries.

### *Notice Body Language*

Transparency is also necessary in the tutor’s body language during a consultation (Belhiah). Because there may be more of a language



barrier with ELL writers, they are much more likely to pick up on a tutor's body language or tone of voice as a substitute for listening to a tutor's words. They will be able to tell when a tutor is merely being polite or when she or he is consciously trying to speak slowly. Rather than sugarcoat anything, a tutor must be honest and clear; asking, "Do you need me to repeat what I just said?" is better than assuming the writer does not understand unless spoken to slowly, or telling the writer that his or her English is better than it is. A lack of transparency from either tutor or writer can lead to negative results. For instance, when I met with an ELL writer who was a little difficult to read in terms of body language, I was unsure if he valued my suggestions or would follow up on them afterwards. In my reflection on the consultation, I noted my increasing uncertainty about giving the writer suggestions, since I could not tell if I was offending him. Tutors can encourage writers to speak and be engaged in the consultation by asking direct, specific questions that writers can answer in order to combat their possibly quiet or seemingly standoffish nature.

### *Engage in Meta-talk*

One way to make writers comfortable asking questions of the tutor and even begin to direct the consultation is to make them comfortable speaking in the first place, through chitchat and "meta-talk." De Guerrero and Villamil suggest that "about-task" and "off-task" discourse episodes (i.e., conversations) may encourage writers to feel more comfortable soliciting peer feedback in the writing center (492). Hyland notes that the Chinese students in her writing workshop were "generally more formal and serious in their approach," making suggested revisions efficiently, quietly, and intensely but without realizing that two-way dialogues about their papers could help them improve as writers (290). One ELL writer "[prefers] small talk so [the tutor will] get to know [her] better personally" and be able to catch undesirable stylistic habits, such as using "a lot of colloquial words in writing, [using] simple expressions, [or if the writer quotes] something that's not [her] style [without] the quotation there, [the tutor can] point it out" (Zhu, 28 Sept.). If ELL writers are encouraged

to talk about themselves, a topic they may feel knowledgeable and comfortable speaking about, they may speak up when they have things to say about the consultation itself.

Tutors should also keep in mind that some ELL writers need time to respond to questions because they must translate what tutors said into their native languages, think of an answer in their native languages, and then translate any responses into English. A tutor should therefore wait two extra beats for the writer to ruminate, and instead of immediately rephrasing following a pause, she should ask if the writer wants the tutor to rephrase or to give her more time. Tutors can even ask “permission to move on” by asking writers, “Are you ready to continue? Was there anything you did not understand that we should return to?” (Wong and Waring 200).

### *Evaluate*

During the consultation, a tutor must evaluate the ELL writer’s comprehension and ensure she understands the suggestions by asking the writer to demonstrate understanding. For example, a tutor can ask a writer to note-take if that is how the individual learns best and keep an eye on whether the notes mirror the tutor’s suggestions, or ask the writer to repeat tasks back that are in her own words, or simply ask for the writer’s input regarding the revisions. Likewise, a tutor can problematize a correct answer by asking, “Are you sure?” or “Why did you write it like this?” (Goldman, 29 Sept.). Alternatively, tutors can ask “pursuit questions,” such as, “Why do you say that? How did you arrive at that? Can you explain so that I can be sure you understand?”), while always remembering to justify their evaluative questions (Wong and Waring 200). By evaluating whether the writer understands given suggestions, a tutor can avoid merely talking *at* the writer. Solicitation of writer input should occur throughout the semester to ensure that the writer comprehends the tutor’s suggestions for revision. Further, in order to better evaluate whether or not their consultations are helpful, tutors can follow up in some form, such as revisiting graded final drafts with the professors’ comments.

## Conclusion

From the beginning of their writing partnership, it is essential that both tutors and their writers know what to expect. On the tutor side, being aware of ELL writers' pre-collegiate writing backgrounds can help tutors remember solutions for additional concerns apart from a general focus on the US mode of writing, with its emphasis on higher order concerns, a linear structure, and argumentation. Tutors must be explicit with the ELL writer about the plan of action for the semester—that they will focus more on higher order concerns, such as structure and style, before tackling lower order issues such as spelling or grammar, and that improvement may not come immediately. A tutor should also use the first meeting as an opportunity to establish rapport with and trust in his or her ability and authority with the writer, to find out what the writer's goals for the writing partnership are, and understand the writer's background with writing. On the writer's side, the first meeting is important for ensuring he or she is aware of several things. She must know that she has the power to direct consultations and that improvement will not magically come about, but that the tutor is willing to put in a certain amount of time.

The implications of this piece depend on a writing center's institutional context. Whether a writing center is the sole form of support for ELL students on campus affects whether tutors must also choose to pay attention to grammar or proofreading, in addition to higher order concerns. But for the many writing centers that serve as the primary resource for ELL students, implementing a system of writing partnerships can help serve these writers better. Training tutors about the meta-issues surrounding consultations with ELL writers can be the first step toward awareness and understanding. For instance, if new writing tutors all take a pedagogy and theory course or have mandatory staff meetings, reading this article might be a first step in addressing these issues. By beginning where the writer is beginning and by conducting writing partnership appointments in a direct, transparent, evaluative, and self-aware manner, the tutor can eventually reach an equilibrium point that will enable twriters to drive the consultation as well. Through mutual understanding and engagement, both writer and tutor can help the former to improve throughout the semester.

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