Successful Writing Consultations: Working with English Language Learners (ELLs)

"ELT[English Language Teaching] is ... an ... activity with political, economic, military, and cultural implications and ramifications." --Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*

In the 21st century, more people learn English as an additional language than as a first language. For native speakers of English, especially teachers, this means they possess privileged knowledge. To be conscious, responsible teachers of English, we must recognize the role English plays in the economic, social, cultural, and academic lives of our students.

WHAT THEORY INFORMS EFFECTIVE ELL CONSULTATIONS?

Four Abilities

Language Learning involves four interrelated skills: **Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking**. In consultations with ELLs, tutors must remember that **differences will exist in each area**. That is, while a student may have a strong grasp of reading and writing, he/she may struggle with listening and speaking. In consultations with such a student, tutors might need to **speak slowly and repeat certain words and phrases**. On the other hand, a student who has strong listening and speaking abilities may struggle with writing. In order to help students, **tutors must recognize the degree to which these abilities influence one another**. To become a successful writer, a student must also focus on reading, speaking, and listening.

Power Distance

In some cultures, teachers adopt a god-like position. Students are expected to listen and absorb every word the teacher says, and they are forbidden to question or challenge a teacher. This occurs in cultures with a strong "power distance" between teachers (authority figures) and students (subject of power). For tutors, this may influence interactions with ELLs. A student may feel reluctant to ask questions and may defer to the tutor's judgment. Power distance is not easily altered. However, tutors may reduce its impact by emphasizing similarities between themselves and students. For instance, tutors could discuss their own challenges in writing papers.

The Role of Interlanguage

Elaine Horwitz defines **interlanguage** as "the way that learners produce the target language" (110). Because ELLs acquire language gradually, their "interlanguage" will combine features of their native language(s) and the target language (English). In addition, students typically acquire language features according to a "U-Shaped" curve, meaning they will proceed through a cycle of proficiency before they fully master a rule. For tutors, it is essential to remember that students will likely repeat an error pattern until their interlanguage has developed enough for them to "master" a grammatical feature.

Affective Factors

Language learning is influenced by three sets of factors (Affective, Cognitive, and Metacognitive). **Cognitive factors** involve how learners process information and are less subject to change. **Metacognitive factors** involve how learners approach the task of learning (scheduling time to study, finding a study partner, etc.). Tutors can promote student success by asking what type of strategies they employ and suggesting additional methods. Perhaps the most important group is **Affective Factors**, which involve students' emotional responses to learning (motivation, anxiety, etc.).

- Motivation plays a tremendous role in student success. Students may feel that their parents, friends, and country are "counting on them" to succeed academically. If they fail to perform, their sense of identity may feel at stake. Tutors shouls recognize how motivation influences performance. It may be helpful to ask students about their goals for an assignment, class, etc. Ultimately, it is essential that tutors AVOID dismissing student concerns—if a student feels an assignment determines the course of his/her life, tutors cannot brush it off as "no big of a deal."
- Anxiety also influences student success. If a student feels threatened or belittled, he/she will not be able to participate in the learning process. Often, anxiety is most debilitating in the classroom, but it also influences writing consultations. If a professor makes a student feel anxious in class, this student may also exhibit anxiety about course assignments. If tutors notice anxiety, it may be helpful to use "stress-reduction" techniques, such as offering students food/drink, changing body position/body language, using another tone of voice, or telling a joke. At times, tutors may need to "talk down" an anxious student and emphasize additional resources available to them.

HOW DO WE BEST PROCEED WITH CONSULTATIONS WITH ELL STUDENTS?

Opening the Session:

- Introduce Yourself
- Indicate the DEWC's "student-centered" approach (less formal)
- Distinguish DEWC's services from editing/correction

Reading the Paper:

- ELLs may be reluctant to read their own paper—the tutor should read it aloud.
- ELLs often use language in ways that mark them as "non-native" speakers—tutors should focus on errors that obscure meaning. Errors common to native-speakers should be addressed later.
- ELLs do not have an intuitive sense of when something "sounds wrong"—they expect a detailed explanation of grammar. This can be difficult for tutors, so you may find it helpful to keep a grammar handbook nearby during consultations.

• Remember that conventions of citation and plagiarism differ from culture (in China an author's exact words appear in <<quote>> rather than in quotes). Tutors should ask if an author's exact words appear in the paper. Students may not know they need to cite paraphrases and summaries.

Ending the Consultation:

- Summarize the consultation—the tutor or student should describe what took place during the consultation.
- Ask the student if he/she has additional concerns—remember that ELLs may need additional time to express their thoughts.
- Tell students about additional resources (Dr. Zbeida, research librarians, etc.).
- Mention online resources (UNC & Purdue OWL sites).

Remember, **as DEWC tutors, you are ALL qualified to help ELLs.** If a more experienced consultant is present, you might ask him/her to sit in on the tutoring session. If not, just do your best. Balance attention to higher order & lower order concerns, and remember that a smile goes a long way.

Additional Resources:

Ferris, Dana and John S. Hedgcock. *Teaching ESL Composition: Purpose, Process, and Practice.* 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Elaine Horwitz. Becoming a Language Teacher: A Practical Guide to Second Language Learning and Teaching. 2nd ed. Boston: Pearson, 2008.

Nation, I.S.P. Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing. New York: Routledge, 2009.