

Workshopping Our Non-Native-English-Speaking Sessions: Ways to Reduce Guilt and Encourage Flexibility When We Consult

Gia Coturri Sorenson
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

At our communication center, approximately 30% of our sessions are with non-native-English-speaking (NNES) students, which has meant that our consultants tend to list “working with NNES writers” as among their top concerns. To help our consultants with their work with NNES students, I ran several workshops when I was the Graduate Assistant Director. These workshops taught me that most consultants instinctively do many of the things I advised. However, many still felt guilty and worried about the quality of their work with NNES students. These workshops helped me clarify what we need to make explicit when we train consultants so they can better understand their role during session with NNES students.

Most of my advice comes from Blau, Hall, and Sparks’s 2002 article “Guilt-Free Tutoring: Rethinking How We Tutor Non-Native-English-Speaking Students.” Their essay combines original research with extensive background reading and concludes that tutors are typically told that “NNES students should be tutored in much the same way as native-English-speaking (NES) students” (Blau, Hall, & Sparks, 2002, p. 24), resulting in exhausted tutors who feel guilty and who fret about being too directive. Rather than attempting to tutor NNES and NES or advanced NNES writers precisely the same, Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002), offer guidelines that help tutors feel less guilty and more flexible:

1. Tutors should have a practical grounding in contrastive rhetoric.

2. Tutors should be prepared to be cultural informants as well as writing consultants.

3. Tutors should be comfortable using a directive approach, especially with local concerns such as grammar, punctuation, idioms, and word usage.

4. Tutors should be comfortable working line-by-line through a paper, or a portion of a paper.

5. Tutors can interweave global and local concerns rather than prioritizing them. If the paper’s clarity is compromised by many local errors, addressing those local errors before global ones can be useful and productive. (p. 42)

I found that the consultants I worked with were relieved when I offered these guidelines, especially when I added two additional points: 1) NNES students will gain tremendously just from having the consultation because they are practicing their language skills in a supportive environment and 2) there can be multiple sessions for a single paper and consultants ought to encourage NNES writers to come back. To help others think about how they can add to their NNES training, I will explain how I ran my workshops and how I helped consultants rethink their relationship to these sessions.

I began my NNES workshops by asking participants questions that helped them think about their experiences with NNES sessions, encouraged them to compare their own approaches with their co-

workers' approaches, and established goals for the workshop. Not only did these questions spark conversations about common difficulties and feelings, it also enabled consultants to advise each other. In swapping stories, consultants learned from each other and frequently gave each other helpful tips. To help me structure the remainder of the session, I always asked consultants "What would make you feel more confident when working with ESOL writers?" Their answers to this question helped me know what to emphasize.

Next I would review our writing center's list of tips for working with NNES writers. Our list of tips offers common advice. For instance, it reminds consultants that different cultures have unique approaches to language, communication, and argumentation. While this document is useful because it helps consultants understand the typical arc of NNES sessions, most want more reassurance; this is when I introduce Blau, Hall, and Sparks's guidelines.

For consultants at my center, the reminder that a significant part of their work with NNES writers is simply being cultural informants (and learning more about writers' cultures in turn) is particularly comforting. However, I also emphasize that by generously and supportively having conversations with writers, they are helping NNES students learn more about the English language. In other words, sometimes their work is less about "fixing" grammar and more about helping a student practice their ability to articulate their arguments. Therefore, I encourage consultants to avoid asking what Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002) call "closed" questions, which have "only one correct answer" and do not open "up thinking or discussion" (p. 33). While advanced NNES writers and NES students benefit from having consultants mainly ask questions, many early NNES students

struggle with this format, mainly because consultants attempt to have Socratic discussions about specific grammatical elements, a conversation that typically frustrates both writer and consultant. Our consultants tend to express their relief when we discuss this because they have felt obligated to use Socratic questioning even when there is only one correct answer. For instance, as Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002) note (p. 34), using Socratic questioning to get a writer to use the correct preposition tends to devolve into a mere guessing game.

I also recommend consultants shift their vocabulary from "higher and lower order concerns" to "local and global concerns." This shift (recommended by Blau, Hall, & Sparks, 2002) enables them to consult more precisely, rather than asking them to make nuanced decisions about what constitutes "higher order" and "lower order" issues. Showcasing the differences between "global and local" versus "higher and lower" also helps alleviate consultant guilt, primarily because it helps them see that discussing a local issue can alleviate global issues (e.g., rephrasing a thesis statement can help an essay become clearer and more focused) while discussing global issues can alleviate local issues (e.g., discussing a paragraph's organization can help writers fix sentence-level grammar issues on their own). Introducing local and global concerns fosters confidence, helping consultants feel additional enthusiasm for their NNES sessions.

The workshop's final section is practical. Working with sample communication assignments we have been given permission to use for training, consultants practice balancing local concerns with global concerns, particularly considering when they can go through a paragraph line by line and when they can focus on ideas. Consultants tend to instinctively know when to address global

concerns and when to examine local ones; to encourage those who are more hesitant, we read the sample paper together and discuss ways to approach it. While we rarely have time to mimic an actual session, these open group discussions enable consultants to compare approaches and learn from one another, which helps us practice peer advising and ensures that whomever is leading the workshop is not positioned as the only authority.

Even though communication and writing center research emphasize flexibility, most current guidelines for working with NNES students ask consultants to approach NES and NNES sessions similarly. However, this “rule” has not only led to feelings of guilt and loss of confidence among consultants but also confusion and frustration among NNES writers. Clearly we need to give our consultants the ability to approach NNES sessions differently—and that means helping them rethink their role in these sessions and help them feel more comfortable balancing directive consulting with their usual collaborative methods.

References

- Blau, S., Hall, J., & Sparks, S. (2002). Guilt-free tutoring: Rethinking how we tutor non native-English-speaking students. *Writing Center Journal*, 23(1), 23-44.