The writing center and second language writers

Jessica Williams\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*}, Carol Severino\textsuperscript{b,1}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago, (162), 601 S. Morgan, Chicago, IL 60607, USA
\textsuperscript{b}Department of Rhetoric, University of Iowa, 168 English Philosophy Building, Iowa City, IA 52242, USA

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Writing centers (or writing labs) have been part of the higher education landscape since the 1930s (Murphy & Law, 1995). They have been regarded as separate from the classroom, a unique space for writers working on their writing. Originally, they were primarily identified with remediation, an impression that unfortunately lingers even today (Carino, 1992; North, 1984a). In the late 1970s and 1980s, writing centers (WCs) saw a shift that paralleled the shift in composition studies more generally, with greater emphasis on facilitating the writing process, on liberatory practice, writer ownership of text, and collaborative approaches to instruction (Brooks, 1991; Lunsford, 1991). Many WCs embraced the peer tutoring model, pioneered by Bruffee (1984), who maintained that tutoring is best seen as an interaction between peers who share similar backgrounds, experience, and status, one that creates a different and powerful context for learning.

WC pedagogy as inquiry dates perhaps to the publication of Muriel Harris’s \textit{Writing One-on-One} (1986) and to Stephen North’s call for serious writing center research (North, 1984b). There are now numerous guides to WC practice (Capossela, 1998; Gillespie \& Lerner, 2004; Rafoth, 2000), a lively research community, and two dedicated journals (\textit{Writing Center Journal}, \textit{Writing Lab Newsletter}). It was not until ten years ago, however, that attention turned to the second language (L2) writers who were beginning to use—often
in large numbers—college and university WCs, with a flurry of publication on the topic (i.e., Harris & Silva, 1993; Kennedy, 1993; Powers, 1993; Severino, 1993; Thonus, 1993). These articles emphasized various aspects of WC practice regarding L2 writers. They offered advice and guidance to tutors and WC directors on L2 writing and working with L2 writers, including (1) cross-cultural differences in interaction and how to manage them, (2) typical L2 error profiles in terms of syntax, morphology, and lexis, and how tutors should address these, (3) strategies for assisting L2 readers, and (4) the insights of contrastive rhetoric, including how such differences might affect students’ approaches to texts. The first reference to WCs in this journal was Powers and J. Nelson’s (1995) survey of graduate students in the WC. Although limited in scope to students in graduate programs, it pointed to the potential value of collaboration between L2 professionals and WC staff more generally.

Second, and perhaps more important, these articles addressed how tutorials with L2 writers might require a different, or at least a more flexible, approach to tutoring than was being promoted for work with native speakers. The by-now-traditional WC theory and practice suggest a non-directive, collaborative approach to tutoring, with questioning a primary method for encouraging writers to discover their own meaning (Shamoon & Burns, 1995). Tutors are generally instructed not to tell writers how to change their texts; rather, they are taught to use leading questions to help writers formulate their own plans for effective revision. In addition, many are told to deflect or postpone the requests of writers who come in to the center wishing to focus on grammar and instead to suggest that writers focus first on their text as a whole (e.g., Brooks, 1991; Capossela, 1998; Gillespie & Lerner, 2000). This last practice stems in part from the still common impression among students and faculty alike that WCs function as editing services. WC staff have had to make persistent efforts to dispel this notion.

Powers (1993) questioned this standard practice of non-directive tutoring, suggesting instead that tutors act as cultural informants, to explain to L2 writers how educational practices and academic expectations may differ from those with which they are familiar. As more and more L2 writers began to use WCs (Carter-Tod, 1995; Kennedy, 1993; Powers, 1993; Ronesi, 1995), Severino (1994) called for more research to connect native speaker and L2 concerns. Suggestions for a possibly more directive and authoritative role for tutors, which were voiced in these early articles, were taken up in subsequent writing on tutorials with L2 writers (Blau & Hall, 2002; Cogie, Strain & Lorinskas, 1999; Thonus, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2002; Williams, in press). Much of the more recent work pointed to the differences in the interactional structure of sessions with L2 writers, compared to that of sessions with native speakers. Findings suggested the need to strike a balance between providing L2 writers with the information and guidance they sorely needed and the broadly accepted WC philosophy that writers should take and maintain ownership of their own texts. Many L2 writers want and expect their tutors to take on authoritative roles, or at least to take on a variety of roles in response to learners’ needs (Harris, 1997; Thonus, 1999a; Williams, in press). Indeed, a number of tutoring manuals have legitimated this tutor versatility. Harris (1986) listed the different “hats” worn by the tutor—coach, diagno-

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2 We use the term native speaker here to refer to writers using their first language to avoid the more awkward native writer or native speaker writer.
tician, listener, commentator, and counselor, and more recently, McAndrew and Reigstad (2002) discuss three approaches to tutoring—student-centered, collaborative, and teacher-centered—and find them equally valid.

Several of the papers in this issue continue to explore this vein of research. Thonus reports that the strongest finding in her research on tutorials with L2 writers is their “unshakable belief in the authority of the writing tutor” and maintains that in her data nothing seemed to budge them from this position. Nelson and Weigle, in a somewhat contrasting conclusion, report that novice tutors, tutoring outside a writing center as part of a TESOL course on L2 writing, were able to negotiate a variety of roles, including peer and language authority, to arrive at successful tutoring strategies. The authors suggest the difference in setting may have facilitated this flexibility.

There are many pressing research questions about WCs in general. For example, empirical validation of their effectiveness is surprisingly thin, in part, because of the logistical problems of setting up controlled conditions. As regards research that specifically focuses on L2 writers in the WC, there is even less to report. Even using the category “L2 writer” is problematic as there are important differences between international and immigrant learners. In particular, generation 1.5 learners and speakers of international Englishes complicate the NS-NNS dichotomy (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001; Reid, 1997; Thonus, 2003; Williams, 2002).

However, research on L2 writers in the WC is beginning to increase, with several promising directions being explored. Most of these address the extent to which L1 and L2 tutorials do or should differ. Below, we report some initial findings that have begun to emerge and pose questions for future research.

**WC practice/tutor decision making**

Do specific WC techniques currently used with native speakers work equally well with L2 writers?

For example, it has been suggested that reading aloud to catch errors and to edit, a common WC practice in assisting native speakers, does not work as well for L2 writers because of their less developed sense of what “sounds right” (Capossela, 1998; Harris & Silva, 1993; Reid, 1997) and the excessive cognitive load of reading aloud and monitoring at once.

Should tutors take the same approach with L2 writers’ grammatical and lexical errors and other sentence-level concerns as they do with native speakers’?

What is the optimal balance between pushing L2 development through negotiation of form (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) (i.e., prompting learners to self-correct) and simply providing them with the information they may lack through models or direct instruction of the L2? It has been argued that techniques that push learners toward target accuracy are superior to simply telling them the correct form (Lyster, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, & Morganthaler, 1989). Pushing learners to access forms that are part of their L2 knowledge is considered a way of building fluency. However, this will only succeed if the learner has at least partial mastery over the form (Lee, 1997); the tutor cannot elicit what the writer does not know. In addition, almost all research in this
area is on oral interaction; it is not clear how applicable the findings are once writing is involved.

In addition, it has been proposed that tutors sometimes feel that with L2 writers they need to start with lower order concerns and line-edit just to reach an understanding of the paper’s contents (Blau & Hall, 2002; Ritter, 2002). This reverses the priority order for most tutorials with native speakers. What sort of mix and sequence of lower and higher order concerns should we suggest that tutors pursue?

Are there some tutoring approaches that work better with L2 writers?

Some L2 writers have better reading/writing skills than speaking/listening skills. Might such learners benefit from working with tutors via e-mail? During tutoring that is asynchronous (i.e., not in real time), learners have more time to process input and to formulate their response. They also have a record available for later review, providing an opportunity to reprocess both linguistic input and suggestions for revision. However, with e-mail tutoring, tutors lose opportunities to ask L2 writers for immediate clarification about what they meant to say. More chances to clarify confusing passages are available through synchronous tutoring although the trade-off is that the extra time for writers to process the tutor’s language is lost. As yet, the research into these issues is scant at best.

In every tutorial, time limitations require that tutors and writers prioritize. Does/should this process differ for tutorials with native speakers and L2 writers? Is this process consistent across tutors who work with L2 writers?

Tutors are often told to begin with higher order concerns and only later to address lower order concerns. Blau and Hall (2002) report that many tutors of L2 writers find this advice difficult to follow. Part of the confusion is that with L2 writers, it can be more difficult to distinguish between these two categories. “Grammar” problems, including lexical or expression problems, can be of such magnitude as to affect comprehensibility. It is not clear to many tutors how various L2 concerns should be prioritized.

Differentiating among L2 writers

Can we make generalizations about different groups of L2 writers that can usefully inform WC practice?

Not all L2 writers have the same profile. Returning to the issue of reading aloud, we may ask: Are immigrant L2 writers, sometimes described as ear-based English learners, better able to catch errors from reading aloud than international L2 writers, sometimes described as eye-based learners (Reid, 1997)? It has often been said that the L2 writers “know more grammar” than NSs. This probably means they have a greater knowledge of grammatical metalanguage. Does this suggest that tutors should use a more traditional rule-based approach with L2 writers? If so, can we assume that all L2 writers are the same in this respect? For example, are international students more likely to understand these rule-based explanations than immigrant students? A related question is whether the tutors themselves are familiar enough with this metalanguage to be able to use it effectively.
**Interactional structure of tutorials**

*Do tutorials with L2 writers and native speakers differ? In what ways?*

Thonus (this issue) and Williams (in press) speak specifically to this question. Thonus finds those differences in the structure of tutorials, that the opening and diagnosis phases of L2 tutorials are shorter. Williams reports that in L2 tutorials, the diagnosis phase dominates the tutorial to a greater extent than in native speaker tutorials. In L2 sessions, tutor talk shows many signs of interactional dominance, a finding that corroborates those of earlier studies (Cumming & So, 1996; Ritter, 2002; Thonus, 1999a, 2001; Young, 1992). In general, tutors appear more willing to take on authoritative roles with L2 writers. This is manifested in their greater willingness to reply to L2 writers’ questions and requests for help (Thonus, this issue) and by their tendency to control the floor (Thonus, this issue; Williams, in press). For their part, L2 writers voice their wish for their tutors to take on this role, requesting tutor suggestions and evaluations and offering elaborate expressions of gratitude and appreciation.

Tutors also appear to accommodate L2 writers’ comprehension needs. Williams (in press) reports that tutors used fewer directives and more direct suggestions with L2 writers than with native speakers. In retrospective accounts, tutors stated that they did this to ease the processing load for the L2 writers. Thonus (1999b) also suggests that tutors use these simpler modulation strategies in an effort to increase the comprehensibility of their suggestions to L2 writers.

**Connecting WC and L2 acquisition research**

*Can findings in L2 acquisition research inform WC pedagogy?*

The connection between L2 learning and learning to write is implicitly addressed in some of the areas of research already discussed, such as the tendency of tutors to try to make their output comprehensible. In addition, some research has pointed to even closer connections between WC and L2 acquisition research. Ritter (2002), Thonus (1993), and Williams (2002) have urged WC professionals to look to L2 acquisition research, in particular, the Interaction Hypothesis and the insights of sociocultural theory (Williams, this issue), to inform their practice.

Several studies suggest that as in the acquisition of a second language, active participation in negotiation of meaning may facilitate acquisition of literacy skills. Goldstein and Conrad (1990) and Williams (this issue) both find that greater student participation leads to more significant revision. If this is the case, what are the specific discourse characteristics of sessions with greater student participation, and how can tutors foster them? In fact, Ritter (2002) maintains that the dominant status of tutors actually cuts off writer participation, thus limiting opportunities for language learning.

**Foreign language issues**

A final topic, one unfortunately not addressed at all in this issue and on which there is almost no research, is foreign language tutoring (see Strong & Fruth, 2001). To what extent should foreign language tutoring practice mirror ESL tutoring practice? What level of language proficiency is required for the tutor to use the foreign language effectively as the medium of tutoring?
Future directions for L2 writing center research

As Nelson and Weigle’s study in this issue illustrates, case study research of tutoring interactions and relationships can address many of the above questions. Fortunately, WC staff, because of their humanistic training, their valuing of teaching and service, and their intensive day-to-day work, are already oriented to carry out case studies as well as survey research of L2 writers’ perceptions of and level of satisfaction with their tutors’ strategies (e.g. Harris, 1997). It is essential that such case study and survey research reports include explicit research questions, a thorough description of methods, and detailed results that respond to the research questions. For this special issue, many otherwise provocative studies were not accepted because the research questions or the methodology were not articulated clearly enough—either to distinguish a report of a study from a report of everyday practice or to enable another researcher to design a similar follow-up study.

For other methods, particularly experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and topics considered less a part of the culture of WC research (Gillespie, Gillam, Brown & Stay, 2002), WC professionals should consider collaborating with researchers in education, linguistics, L2 acquisition, or in a social science such as psychology. Young and Fritzsche’s (2002) study of procrastination in writing center users versus non-users is an example of collaboration between a WC professional and a psychologist. Other possibilities include collaboration with education researchers to study the effects of tutoring on L2 writers’ academic achievement and with linguists and L2 acquisition scholars on effects of tutoring on L2 learning. In light of the increasing use of WCs by L2 writers, especially the growing generation 1.5 population in the U.S., we hope that the current issue inspires both the L2 writing and WC communities to engage in research to discover exactly what happens to these L2 writers when and after they work with tutors.

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