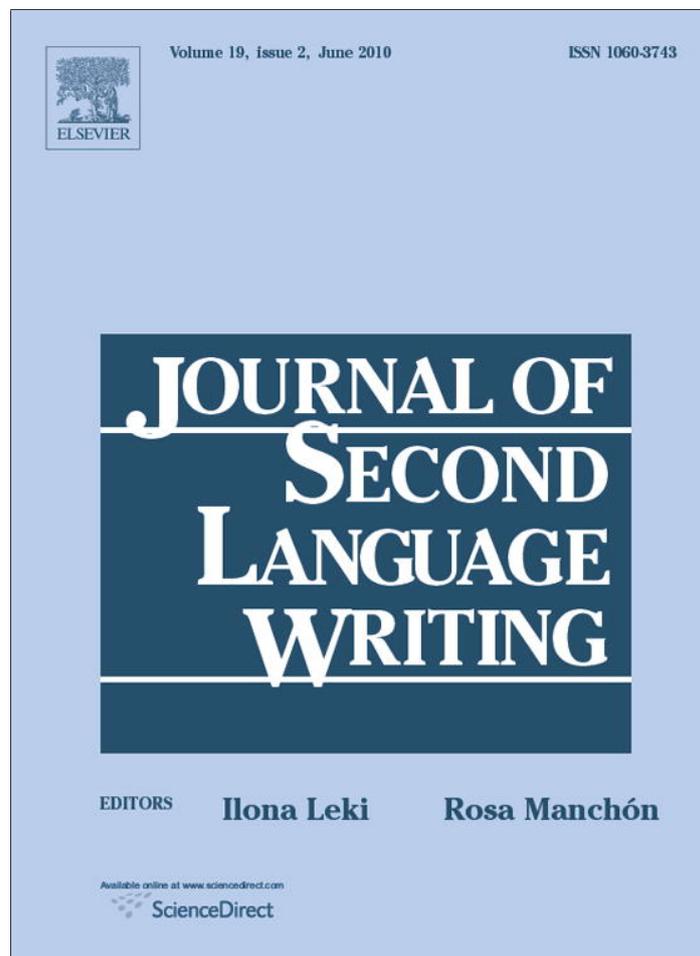


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Lexical issues in writing center tutorials with international and US-educated multilingual writers

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Abstract

There is very little research on lexical issues in writing center tutorials with second language writers, despite the impact that lexical strengths and needs have on the ability to make meaning with text. Further, we have come to realize that L2 writers come from many backgrounds and may have very different strengths and needs based on their prior experiences with English and writing. With this in mind, the present small-scale study of four students (two international students and two US-educated students) aimed to empirically examine whether, and how, these two groups of students exhibited differences in lexical strengths and needs during writing center tutorials. Further, the study aimed to explore the tutors' orientation toward linguistic aspects of students' texts. Among the findings were that US-educated learners demonstrated superior strengths in the areas of lexical facility, lexical flexibility, and lexical intuition, perhaps related to their experiences as ear learners. International students and tutors spent relatively more time on discussing lexical issues in their sessions, but tutors did not articulate this in post-tutorial reflections. Tutors' orientation toward writing as consisting of "content" and "grammar" may have influenced both the way they provided feedback and the way they reflected on their own feedback.

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Keywords: Oral feedback; Generation 1.5; L2 writers; Writing center; International students; Lexical feedback

It is well known that second language (L2) writers often come to the writing center for help not only with rhetorical aspects of their writing, but linguistic (syntactic and lexical) aspects as well. This sometimes creates a conflict between the traditional writing center philosophy of focusing on higher order (text-level or non-linguistic) concerns on the one hand, and attending to the individual student's needs and goals for the session on the other hand (Williams, 2004). The debate thus far has mostly centered on *whether* writing center tutors should provide language (sentence-level) help, rather than the nature of students' linguistic needs (or strengths, often overlooked) and the ways that tutors attend to them (e.g., Blau & Hall, 2002; Cogie, Strain, & Lorinskas, 1999; Myers, 2003; Staben & Nordhaus, 2009). Attention to language is often presented as editing or proofreading and is almost always equated with "grammar," despite the fact that having access to and being able to effectively use English words and phrases (i.e., lexical knowledge/skills) is crucial to creating meaningful written texts in English.

The focus of this study is L2 writers' lexical needs and strengths, as they arise in writing center sessions, and how the tutors orient to the students' linguistic needs in general. Further, since we have come to understand more about the diversity among L2 writers and how background differences can affect strengths and needs, this study examines differences in

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lexical strengths and needs exhibited by international and US-educated student writers. A large-scale study of many sessions with students from a great number of different backgrounds would ultimately be necessary to provide generalizable findings and concrete implications. However, the complex nature of interactive events like writing center tutorials makes the collection and close analysis of many hours of data both time- and labor-intensive. Further, it is through in-depth interaction with *individuals*, rather than generalizations, that writing center staff build expertise and awareness. Therefore, an in-depth examination of the experiences of a small number of individuals is an appropriate place to begin.

Review of literature

L2 writers in the writing center

Writing centers, common on US college campuses (and increasingly in non-US contexts as well), are places where students can talk one-to-one with a tutor to improve their writing skills. Tutors may be peers (undergraduate or graduate students with strong writing skills) or professionally trained writing teachers. Writing center staff are usually familiar with first language (L1) composition theory and issues. Although there is much diversity in the policies and implementation of writing centers, most are guided by philosophies of process-approach writing and non-directive, Socratic methods of tutoring (Harris, 1992).

As greater numbers of L2 writers have turned to the writing center, researchers have examined the interaction between native English-speaking (NES) tutors and nonnative English-speaking (NNES) tutees and compared NES and NNES student writers. Thonus' (1999, 2002, 2004) analyses of interaction between tutors and their NES and NNES tutees found communicative dominance on the part of the tutors, regardless of whether the tutee was NES or NNES. However, certain manifestations of dominance were more prominently or frequently found in tutorials with NNES. These include turn length, length of negotiation sequences, mitigation, taking charge, and holding the floor.

Tutor role—as perceived by both the tutor and the tutee—is another important factor explored by researchers studying writing center interaction. It is claimed that NNES tutees, more so than NES tutees, expect the writing tutor to be an authority or “teacher” figure (Healy & Bosher, 1992; Thonus, 1999, 2004). Negotiation of tutor role can also depend on the (English) language proficiency of the tutee and the training/background of the tutor (Weigle & Nelson, 2004). The student participant in Waring's (2005) study of advice-resisting in a graduate writing center rejected feedback that she felt the peer tutor was not qualified to give as a non-expert in the disciplinary field of the paper.

Active student participation seems to be an important factor in the success of writing center tutorials. Williams (2004) found that the focus of discussion in a session is usually the focus of revision, particularly with surface-level features and when writers participated actively in the conversation. Cogie (2006) analyzed tutorials with two international students, showing how their participation in the sessions was (or was not) facilitated, and how this affected the students' opportunities for second language acquisition.

International and US-educated multilingual writers

Most research on L2 writers in the writing center focuses explicitly or implicitly on the experiences of international (i.e., “foreign” visa) students and the tutors who work with them. For example, much is written about cultural differences and contrastive rhetoric (see, e.g., Bell & Youmans, 2006; Bruce & Rafoth, 2004; Kennedy, 1993; Powers, 1993; Severino, 1993), both areas of inquiry which are relevant for tutors working with international students who have learned the rhetorical styles of writing in languages other than English.

However, there is a growing awareness and indeed an explosion of interest recently in the differences between international students (traditional “ESL” students) and US-educated multilingual writers.¹ International and US-educated multilingual writers, based on their varying experiences in English language acquisition and education, have

¹ It is exceedingly difficult to find a term that is precise enough to accurately describe the relevant similarities among the students in the group but is broad enough to allow for the diversity that exists in this extremely heterogeneous group. Some of the many ways these students have been identified in previous literature are *Generation 1.5* or *Long-term US Resident ESL* (Harklau et al., 1999), *Resident Nonnative Speakers of English* (Sadler, 2004), *Resident ESL* (Friedrich, 2006), and *Non-English Language Background* (Levi, 2004). In the present study, I have chosen to use the term *US-educated multilingual writers* to highlight what I am foregrounding as important characteristics of these students: the fact that they were partially or wholly educated in the US school system, and the fact that they use more than one language.

been hypothesized to bring different sets of strengths and needs to the project of academic writing. Reid (1998) termed the former group “eye learners,” based on their experience of learning English as a foreign language in their home countries (often through grammar translation methods). These students are typically familiar with grammatical metalanguage (Leki, 1992) and may function better in reading and writing than in speaking and listening (at least initially)—which sometimes results in overly formal speech.

US-educated multilingual writers, on the other hand, have been called “ear learners” due to their experience of acquiring English in the United States through oral interaction with other speakers of English (Reid, 1998). This results in a high level of oral fluency, strong communicative strategies, and more colloquial English usage. In addition, they have greater familiarity with US culture than their international counterparts (Leki, 1992). Despite their oral/aural strengths, however, US-educated multilingual students may lack awareness of certain structural features such as inflectional morphemes that are more salient in writing than in speech. Like monolingual basic writers, they may lack explicit knowledge of grammatical rules and metalanguage and may write in an informal style based on spoken English (Leki, 1992; Reid, 1998; Shaughnessy, 1977). Ironically, at the college level, these long-term US residents seem to be at a relative academic disadvantage to international or recent immigrant students (Bosher & Rowekamp, 1992; Muchisky & Tangren, 1999).

The most recent edition of the central edited collection on ESL students in the writing center (Bruce & Rafoth, 2009) specifically addresses the increasing diversity among ESL students. The book opens with an overview of the different sub-categories of L2 writers with general descriptions of student characteristics, written specifically for a writing center audience (Leki, 2009). Ritter and Sandvik’s (2009) chapter on Generation 1.5 writers in the writing center suggests that tutors build on the specific strengths these students possess—high levels of competency in spoken English and experience with “ear learning”—during writing tutorials.² The authors note that although their three student participants “act like typical American college students, and . . . have high competency in spoken English,” the writing center tutors nonetheless categorize them as “ESL learners, meaning those who need help with language concerns” (p. 93). This observation likely reflects the fact that writing center staff in general still perceive ESL students as “foreigners, or people who can’t speak English” (Leki, 2009, p. 2).

Indeed, there are few published studies of US-educated L2 writers in a writing center setting, and most do not foreground the characteristics of this population as a focus of the research. For example, student participants in Williams’ (2004) study of the connection between writing center feedback and subsequent revision were long-term US residents who had graduated from US high schools. Bokser (2004) examined the role of listening in a study of peer-tutor education. Though the study participants were tutors, not students, the ESL student population at the research site consisted mostly of long-term US residents. She argued that the growing presence of these students in colleges in the US will make writing center tutorials a “‘contact zone’ encounter in which participants will need to work even harder to figure out how to collaborate with someone who speaks a different language, holds different cultural values, and lives down the block” (p. 45).

There are several informative reviews comparing the experiences and general characteristics of international and US-educated multilingual students, for the purpose of raising awareness of the diversity among L2 students (e.g., Friedrich, 2006; Leki, 2009; Roberge, 2002). In fact, we know a lot about the different kinds of experiences that these students have had and their general characteristics; what we know much less about (empirically) is how these differences and characteristics affect teaching and learning in particular contexts, like writing centers.³ The present study aims to address this gap and build upon general categorical descriptions by presenting and comparing tutorial data from four individual students, focusing particularly on linguistic (rather than cultural or rhetorical) aspects of the tutorials.

Responding to language in L2 writers’ texts

There is a tendency in writing center literature to characterize writing and language as separate, hierarchically related aspects of a text, or *higher-order concerns* and *lower-order concerns*. Attention to the lower-order concern of

² An earlier article by Thonus (2003) offered suggestions for tutoring Generation 1.5 students based on their educational and language acquisition background (as distinct from both NES tutees and international ESL students). Among the suggestions are to teach metalanguage, to affirm cultural and linguistic heritage, to balance grammar correction with rhetorical concerns, to offer explicit direction, and to avoid appealing to NS intuition.

³ See Ritter and Sandvik (2009), for an exception.

language is often characterized as “proofreading,” which tutors are advised to avoid (Cogie et al., 1999). Rather, tutors are urged to “deal with higher-order concerns (HOCs) of focus, organization, and development before lower-order concerns (LOCs) of grammar and mechanics, no matter whom they are tutoring” (Blau & Hall, 2002, p. 24). This is probably because writing centers were originally designed to support students who were writing in their (fully developed) native language. Language concerns in these students’ tutorials are usually related to prescriptive rules of punctuation, orthography, or the differences between spoken English and standard written English (Devet, 2008). Attending to these sentence-level linguistic features in L1 texts usually means editing or error correction, which writing centers discourage in general.

This general admonishment against editing and proofreading papers has been applied to sessions with L2 writers as well, despite the fact that L2 writers’ language concerns are very different from L1 writers’ and are much more likely to affect meaning-making than merely editing or proofreading needs. ESL writers are not only practicing the craft of writing and finding their voice, but also engaging in language learning. Though some still suggest that tutors resist giving feedback on language (Staben & Nordhaus, 2009), others argue that the writing center is an ideal place for L2 students to develop both oral and written language skills (Blau & Hall, 2002; Myers, 2003; Williams, 2002). Despite the fear of appropriating students’ texts or voices (e.g., by reformulating their wording or correcting errors), tutors are in a position to function as language resources (Minett, 2009). Severino (2009) suggests that ESL writers face intense pressure to improve their writing in English, and “may be more willing to trade some of their voice for accuracy, idiomaticity, and increased language learning” (p. 56). Pyle (2005) recommended that tutors be given “more leeway to . . . give the L2 students . . . more robust feedback in the arena of expression [e.g., grammar and word choice], as well as training . . . in how best to do so” (as cited in Kastman Breuch & Clemens, 2009, p. 134).

Currently, advice about responding to language in tutorials with L2 writers revolves around grammar. For example, tutors are advised to identify a pattern of error and teach the student how to self-correct all instances of the error by learning and applying grammar rules (Linville, 2009), and to prioritize “features that are ungrammatical rather than just nonidiomatic.” If tutors encounter a problem they cannot explain, then “it is best to look it up together in a grammar book” (Severino, 2009, p. 61). In the current conversation about responding to language, little mention is given to the effect that lexical choices (and how to use them appropriately) have on a student’s ability to write effectively.

However, L2 writers often produce papers that are “‘vague and confusing,’ precisely because the writer may lack the necessary vocabulary to clarify their intended meaning” (Minett, 2009, p. 74). In fact, most errors in some L2 writers’ texts may be lexical in nature, rather than grammatical (Myers, 2003), and L2 writers may want or need extensive feedback on their word choice (Cogie, 2006; Cumming & So, 1996). Moreover, error gravity research shows that wrong word choice is one of the errors that professors react most strongly to, as it impacts the meaning of the writing (Matsuda & Cox, 2009). Despite this, there is scant mention of lexical issues in the literature on L2 writers in the WC. The present study aims to address this gap in the literature by looking specifically at lexical strengths and needs of L2 writers from different backgrounds. Further, the research aims to examine whether the tutors in the study exhibit the same orientation toward linguistic aspects of students’ texts that is reflected in the literature—i.e., do they prioritize grammar over lexis?

The study

Research questions

Based on the gaps in existing research noted above, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How often do the students and tutors attend to lexical issues relative to grammatical issues?
Are there any differences between tutorials with international and US-educated students?
2. What lexical strengths and needs do the students exhibit during tutorials?
Are there any differences between tutorials with international and US-educated students?
3. How do the tutors characterize linguistic aspects of the students’ texts?
Do tutors accurately articulate the nature of the feedback they provided on linguistic aspects of the students’ texts?

The research site

This study was conducted in the writing center of a large, urban four-year college (hereafter referred to by the pseudonym “Madison College”). Having worked at the Madison College writing center as a tutor for three years and for another year as the Assistant Director, I was thoroughly familiar with the culture, policies, and practices as well as with the tutors and with the general characteristics of the students who visited us. The writing center was open to all Madison students, but our clients were primarily multilingual students from one of the two required first-year English composition courses. ESL courses had been largely eliminated at Madison as part of a campaign to end so-called remediation in the four-year colleges of the larger university system. Since that time, the writing center had become the de facto source of both writing and English language support for many multilingual students.

At the time of data collection (fall 2006), there were 17 tutors at the writing center—seven men and ten women. Unlike many other college writing centers, the Madison College writing center was (and continues to be) staffed not by undergraduate or graduate peer tutors, but by professional tutors who all held Masters degrees and who taught writing at the college level, either at Madison or elsewhere. Several were pursuing doctorates in literature, TESOL, or a related field.

Data collection

This small-scale study focused on four student–tutor dyads. Since my research aim was a detailed examination of students’ lexical strengths and needs in the naturalistic setting of writing center tutorials, qualitative methods were appropriate. Qualitative methodology seeks greater understanding of the particular and individual, rather than the generalizable. Part of my purpose in carrying out and reporting on this study was in fact to build upon general descriptions of student characteristics, painted in “broad strokes” (Leki, 2009, p. 3), and introduce particular individual students’ experiences. It is through interacting with individual real students (including through the pages of a research article) that general descriptions take on meaning.

Finally, limiting the study to a small number of participants allowed me to collect and recursively analyze qualitative data from multiple sources. This is common for research in writing center settings (see, e.g., Cogie, 2006; Ritter & Sandvik, 2009; Weigle & Nelson, 2004; Williams, 2004). From each student, I collected a background questionnaire with information about educational experiences and language use (Appendix A). The student then came to the writing center for a 45-minute tutorial with the tutor, bringing a draft of writing written for a content-area college course. I recorded (on video⁴) and transcribed all tutorials, and collected the student texts. Tutors participated in brief post-tutorial interviews, and students returned for in-depth interviews. The student interviews primarily served as a way to get information related to the language acquisition and educational experiences of the students. All interviews were also recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The data used for this study are a subset of a larger study on writing center feedback. After reviewing the tutorial data to identify all instances of tutor feedback, which (usually) occurred through sequences of moves negotiated with the students, I categorized each feedback sequence according to the aspect of language or writing the feedback addressed. In approaching the data, I did not have a strict preset system for coding. Rather, the categories emerged from what was important to the participants in this particular study as they talked about the student texts. Six categories emerged from the original analysis of feedback: rhetorical, grammatical, lexical, phonological (pronunciation), orthographical, and academic feedback. In cases where feedback sequences overlapped (i.e., the participants began addressing a different issue before the closing of the original feedback sequence), both sequences were counted and categorized separately. Since I was able to quantify the number of total feedback sequences as well as identify the

⁴ Videotaping carries the potential for altering the participants’ behavior or comfort. However, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggest that if the activity in question is sufficiently engaging, participants will soon forget about the presence of the camera (p. 105). During the interviews, most participants indicated that they completely forgot they were being recorded. Based on my own experience as a tutor, I felt that the recorded tutorials did not differ in any way from normal tutorials that could plausibly be related to the recording.

category for each sequence, I was able to see the breakdown of each session in terms of the aspects of language and writing that the feedback addressed. This method of analysis enabled me compare the relative frequency of each feedback category across the four tutorials.

In order to address the research questions of the present study, I examined in detail the lexical feedback from the sessions. Lexical feedback relates to form and meaning at the level of the word: e.g., word choice, word formation (i.e., derivational morphology, or word families formed by roots and affixes that change the part of speech), idioms and idiomaticity, including collocational behavior. Specific examples of lexical feedback from tutorial data are presented and discussed in the “Findings and discussion” section.

Participants

There were six participants in this study: four student writers and two writing tutors. The student participants were all undergraduates at Madison. Two of the student participants had finished high school (and some college) in their home countries through the medium of their home languages, and two had attended and graduated from local US high schools through the medium of English. Home languages represented by the student participants were Japanese and Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese).

Students were invited to participate through a recruitment flier distributed in special sections of first-year composition courses that were designated for students whose writing had been judged, by raters trained to read and score ACT essays, to have “ESL features.” There were also fliers at the writing center. The students contacted me by email to indicate their interest in participating. None of the students were known to me before they volunteered to participate.

The tutor participants were my colleagues and were veteran tutors at the Madison College writing center. Invitations to participate and consent forms were distributed to tutors at a regular staff meeting. Interested tutors returned their signed consent forms at a later date. All participants volunteered to take part in the study, making them a self-selected group who did not object to being videotaped or (for the students) to being identified with the label “ESL student.” All participants were modestly compensated for their participation.

Tutor participants (Table 1)

Teresa: Teresa, a white 25-year-old woman, had worked at the writing center for five semesters at the time of data collection and was one of the most popular tutors there. Teresa was pursuing a doctorate in English literature and in addition to tutoring, she also taught undergraduate courses in writing and literature every semester. Like all tutors at the writing center, Teresa had extensive practical experience working with multilingual writers, though she had had no specialized training.

One of Teresa’s great strengths as a tutor was her ability to establish rapport with students and make them feel comfortable. She was skilled at giving praise that was both genuine and helpful. In addition, Teresa showed confidence in giving feedback: she seemed intuitively to know when to give direct, straightforward suggestions and when to be more Socratic in her technique. Teresa was not apologetic about breaking some of the most cherished rules of writing center dogma, like not “giving students words” and not writing on students’ papers. But at the same time, she flouted these rules in ways that seemed to help students move forward.

Danielle: Danielle, an African American woman, was 36 years old at the time of this study. She had worked at the writing center for three semesters and had recently completed a master’s degree in TESOL. Before her interest in education, Danielle had worked in media production—both radio and television. At the time of the study, she was

Table 1
Summary of demographic information on tutor participants.

Name (all are pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Number of semesters at writing center	Born in . . .	Went to high school in . . .	Academic specialty
Teresa	Female	25	5	US	US	Ph.D. student in literature
Danielle	Female	36	3	US	US	Holds Masters degree in TESOL

Table 2
Summary of demographic information on student participants.

Name (all are pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Number of semesters at Madison	Born in ...	Went to high school in ...	Years in the US
Shaolan	Female	24	1	China	China	.5
Aki	Female	39	^a	Japan	Japan	9
Li	Male	18	1	China	New York	6
Jet	Male	18	1	Hong Kong	New York	7

^a Exact number unclear, but Aki had been attending Madison “off and on” for several semesters.

teaching ESL courses at another college in addition to working at the writing center. Shortly after participating in this study, Danielle traveled to Costa Rica with a US State Department program to teach English for six months.

As a tutor, Danielle had an extensive awareness of resources. She was the “go-to” tutor for various useful materials such as guides for how to interpret different genres of literature; sources of grammar exercises for ESL students; web-based reference tools like dictionaries, thesauruses, and encyclopedias; and many others. Her tutoring style differed significantly from Teresa’s in this respect. She was much less likely to offer direct suggestions; rather, her preferred strategy was to model the use of reference materials by consulting dictionaries and handbooks during the sessions. Occasionally, she spent a great deal of session time on reading reference materials.

Student participants (Table 2)

Shaolan: “*If I stay here, neither will be good.*” Shaolan was a cheerful, friendly 24-year-old student from China. She graduated from high school and attended three years of college in China before moving to the United States six months prior to participating in my study. Shaolan did not choose to move to the United States, but rather came with her mother reluctantly. She told me of the acute loneliness and sense of loss she initially felt here. Things improved for Shaolan once she started taking classes at Madison and made some friends, though she said it was still difficult.

Shaolan’s experience with learning English as a foreign language in middle and high school in China sounds similar to many others: English was a subject to be mastered for the purpose of passing a university entrance exam, with a heavy focus on reading and grammar. However, as an English major in college, she did have some opportunities to practice speaking and listening in English at the “English Corner”: a place where students could go to talk to native speakers of English (English teachers at the university, usually from the US or the UK). Shaolan went to the English Corner because she wanted to make friends and because she felt duty-bound to improve her English. She said, though, that the repetitive and superficial nature of the conversations there left her unsatisfied.

Shaolan reported that at the time of our interview, she was equally comfortable listening in both her languages—Chinese and English. Speaking, reading, and writing, however, were easier in Chinese than in English. In fact, Shaolan was still learning how to express herself in English. Her oral proficiency in English was quite good considering the short length of time she had been using English in earnest, yet pronunciation and fluency issues still sometimes impeded communication.

Shaolan had extensive literacy experience in her first language. During our interview, she commented on rhetorical and stylistic differences between writing in the two languages. When I asked Shaolan to compare her writing ability in her two languages, she seemed to feel that it would be impossible to achieve and maintain strong skills in both:

Excerpt 1⁵:

Sa: Do you think, that your writing, is better in Chinese? Or is better in English.

Sh: I think it’s, (laughs) both of them are not good!

Sa: OK, but, if you had to choose one that you think is a little better.

Sh: I think it’s be in Chinese.

Sa: It’s a little better in Chinese?

⁵ Transcription conventions are listed in Appendix B.

Sh: I think if I stay in the United States for a few, year, [mm hmm] neither of them will be good. (both laugh) I will forget the Chinese one and I didn't get, I don't get the English one!

Shaolan brought in a paper she wrote for her English (composition) class, describing and interpreting a photograph. The paper, "A Strong Girl in my Eyes," described a photograph of a vulture hovering above a starving girl in the Sudan. This was not Shaolan's first visit to the writing center; she had already worked on this paper with another tutor to clarify her ideas and claims, and in general the paper was strong when she arrived for her session with Teresa.⁶ Shaolan initially said she was interested in "proofreading" the paper during this session. After reading the first paragraph aloud, though, she mentioned "the correction of the theme."

Aki: "I try to catch up." At age 39, Aki was the oldest of the student participants in this study. She graduated from high school and junior college in her native Japan. She had lived in the United States for a total of nine years, though there was a two-year break during that time when she was living in Japan. Aki decided to come to the United States to "find herself" and study art after getting divorced. She had been pursuing a degree at Madison off and on for a number of years, and was enrolled in upper-level courses in art, management, and environmental studies.

Of all the students in this study, Aki had the lowest level of oral proficiency in English. Her pronunciation, sentence structure, lack of vocabulary, and lack of fluency sometimes impeded her ability to communicate. She used Japanese exclusively to talk to her family, and reported being more comfortable in all aspects—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—in Japanese than in English. She said, though, that her friends here were both Japanese and non-Japanese, so she used both languages in social situations.

Aki, like all Japanese students, studied English as a foreign language in middle and high school. And, like most, she reported that the classes focused on grammar rule memorization to the exclusion of communicative practice—so much so that she grew to "hate" them. Her experience with EFL in her home country was very similar to Shaolan's.

Not surprisingly, Aki had a high level of literacy in her L1, Japanese. Though academic writing was not emphasized in her high school, she was part of a literature club that wrote, published, and read student work for pleasure. Aki mentioned during our interview that it was very difficult at first to write in an American rhetorical style. She also felt frustration that she could not express herself (in writing, in this case) or her ideas in English in the way that she knew she could easily do in Japanese.

Aki was the only participant who said that functioning in English was getting harder, not easier, as time went on. In her interview with me, she commented on the increasing demands of the environment and her ability to keep up:
Excerpt 2:

A: Um, it's getting harder. Because the new, you know, (laughs) there is no limitation for learning, you know, second language or third language and especially now, so, I should (..) be, on, BUSIness level (..) or, yeah, COLLege level? But I'm not native, and then but the, (..) So, oh OK, got it. But (..) you know I don't want to, give up, learning (..) ENGLISH, [S: mm hmm] So, I try to catch up [S: mm hmm] or [S: yeah] improve myself. [S: yeah, of course]

Aki's paper, titled "The Big Difference between Good Websites and Bad Websites," compared websites from two major corporations (Kleenex and Tag Heuer Watches) on a quality she called "usability." It was written for an art course. The major problem with Aki's paper was English expression. Most sentences in the paper were technically grammatically acceptable; however, dysfluency and lack of idiomaticity prevented Aki from effectively expressing what she admitted was an "easy" idea: the reasons why one website is better than the other. Aki had been to the writing center many times before during her years at Madison, and had worked with Danielle previously.

Li: "I'm like forget about Chinese now." Li was a quiet, serious student who was born in China and moved to New York with his family at the age of twelve. At the time of data collection, Li was 18 years old and in his first semester of college. He attended elementary school and one year of middle school in China before immigrating, finishing middle and high school in New York. This means that his pre-college education was exactly evenly split between the two countries (six years in each). Upon entering the New York City school system at age 12, Li was first enrolled in a

⁶ Students often return to work with the same tutor, both on multiple drafts of the same paper and on different papers. There are some reasons why a student might choose to work with a different tutor, but the most common is that the "regular" tutor is unavailable. In Shaolan's case, she volunteered to participate in this study but her regular tutor was not participating.

bilingual Chinese-English program, where he made many Chinese-speaking friends. In high school, he took ESL classes for two years, then mainstream classes for his final two years.

Li reported using English more than Chinese for most activities besides talking to family not living in his home. He was orally fluent, though he still retained a marked accent. For example, he tended to omit word-final consonants. Li's oral proficiency in English did not seem, to him (nor to me), to cause a problem in communication. He told me that he was equally comfortable speaking in Chinese or English, though listening was still more comfortable in Chinese. He added, "But, if you are speaking English to me, I mean, I can handle it."

I asked Li about his literacy experiences and his comfort reading and writing in his two languages. He found it more difficult to write in English than to speak (which is true for many people), yet all of his writing at the time was in English. In fact, the way he spoke about writing in Chinese made it sound very far removed from him. He told me, "I'm like forget about Chinese now. . . I remember how my parents told me about Chinese there's like different forms of Chinese. You know, when a Chinese word combines, like different words combine to form another Chinese words. [Yes.] So it's kinda like confusing."

Li's level of proficiency in English was lower than that of the other US-educated student in this study, both in terms of pronunciation and in terms of oral and written accuracy. But he told me that his greatest challenge in studying at college was not related to language per se. Rather, he struggled to understand the more sophisticated concepts of his college courses and also felt more pressure to achieve high grades.

Li brought in a short paper titled "Applying the Five Sociological Theories" he had written for an introductory-level sociology course. The assignment was to describe an event or incident from the perspective of five different theories, including conflict theory, functionalism, feminism, symbolic interactionism, and exchange theory. The paper read conversationally, though it did show some attempts at approximating more academic ways of writing—e.g., a sprinkling of transition words throughout (some more appropriate than others). The biggest shortcoming of the paper was a lack of content. The paper did not reflect a clear grasp of the five theories it was supposedly addressing, and Li's attempts to apply them to the situation he described were undeveloped and unconvincing. There were also some grammatical errors in the paper (mostly verb inflection and agreement). Li had never visited the writing center before this session.

Jet: "Stuck in the middle of two languages." Jet was also 18 years old and a freshman at Madison. His profile was similar to Li's in a number of ways. Born in Hong Kong, he moved to New York with his parents when he was 11, where he attended middle and high school before enrolling at Madison. Both Li and Jet are classic examples of students who have been called "Generation 1.5." Jet, however, had a relaxed confidence and outspoken personality that Li did not. He also had a higher level of oral and written proficiency in English, with far fewer marked features in his pronunciation and greater overall accuracy.

Although he moved to a Chinese community in New York, where there were many Chinese-speaking neighbors (including "ABCs" or American-born Chinese), Jet did not have many Chinese-speaking friends at school. Rather than a bilingual program, he was immediately enrolled in ESL class. The ESL class, according to Jet, was "pretty diverse because I, my classmates are like, from Mexico, some are from India. . . It was pretty diverse." Jet exited ESL classes by passing a test in the eighth grade, after which he took mainstream classes in high school.

Jet reported using Cantonese exclusively when talking to family in his home and using Cantonese more often than English when talking to extended family and when reading newspapers. He also occasionally used Cantonese when exchanging email with friends. Thus, he had a much higher level of L1 literacy than Li, though his academic writing experiences were only in English. When I asked Jet about his writing skills in English and Chinese, he said:

Excerpt 3:

J: (. . .) In (. . .) that's a hard question. [mm hmm] I think they're both equivalents. [OK?] Because now I moved here for, seven years I [mm hmm] (. . .) lost some of the Chinese background [mm hmm] so, my writing is not as (. . .) good as before. [OK] So my Chinese got worse and my English did not improve, so I'm stuck in the middle of both languages.

Jet's paper was a short response to two sociology texts, titled "Short response paper." In Jet's words, the assignment was to "just read the material and tell the instructor what you think about the reading." The paper was relatively strong—Jet showed some understanding of the course reading and concepts and his writing was fluent and entirely comprehensible, with only a few minor errors. This was Jet's second visit to the writing center and first time working with Teresa.

Findings and discussion

Research question #1

How often do the students and tutors attend to lexical issues relative to grammatical issues?⁷ Are there any differences between tutorials with international and US-educated students?

International student participants and their tutors addressed lexical issues much more frequently than US-educated participants (and their tutors). Further, lexical issues were addressed more frequently than other issues in sessions with international students. This is consistent with findings from other studies in which word choice emerged as an important focus of discussion in ESL writing conferences (Cogie, 2006; Cumming & So, 1996). More than 40% of the 55 feedback sequences in Shaolan's session addressed lexical aspects of the paper. Only 13%, or seven out of 55 sequences, were related to grammatical issues. I felt that the feedback fairly closely represented her actual needs; i.e., Shaolan's biggest need seemed to be for more lexical facility in both word choice and word form, and Teresa's feedback addressed lexical issues more than any others.⁸

Aki's session too contained more lexical than grammatical feedback, though there were fewer total feedback sequences than in Shaolan's session. Eight out of 33 sequences (24%) addressed lexical issues, while just three out of 33 (9%) addressed grammatical issues. Unlike Shaolan's session, however, the feedback did not necessarily match Aki's most urgent needs, nor did it match the goals negotiated by the two. At the opening of the session, Aki tried to explain her greatest need:

Excerpt 4:

A: Then, problem is, I don't know how to say it. I mean, you know, I want to, I have an idea about website. For me, (...) this website is a good website. For me, Kleenex, this one is not bad site, good site. So, today, because, you know, it's hard for me to explain that reason in English. (...) I have a pictures, so, you can tell me about how I can write about the thing I, that I want to say.

The negotiation of session goals continued for several more exchanges, excerpted below. These exchanges show Aki's difficulty in making her own goals clear to Danielle, in part due to her oral proficiency in English:

Excerpt 5:

D: OK. So why don't you read it (...) you want to focus on, what, exactly? Besides [A: Grammar. (...)] grammar (...) What else do you want to work on?

A: And then, like, a uses? How to, uh, make a nice one, or a, nice, approach. (...) I mean, no. That's, how to build the (...) um, contents, or ideas.

D: How to build the contents. OK, so you're unsure about the content.

A: Ahh, but, I'm sure (...) [D: You're sure about it.] It's easy, because it, you know, it's a pro and con, so it's easy for me to (...) argue, say it (...) [D: All right, OK.] But the, I mean, especially the grammar contents.

D: The grammar, OK. So you want to make sure the grammar is clear, the con-um, [A: Yeah, clear.] I guess the sentence structure, clear.

Though initially Aki had tried to indicate that she needed help saying what she wants to say, she and Danielle ultimately negotiated the goals of the session to "grammar" and making the "sentence structure clear." In reality, the two barely discussed sentence structure or clarity at all, despite these being very important problems in Aki's writing. The session focused overwhelmingly on two issues: repetition of the word *website*, and punctuation. It is doubtful that the feedback she received helped her with her stated goal: help to "write about the thing I, that I want to say." Nevertheless, the discussion of how to avoid repetition by finding alternatives,

⁷ For the purposes of this paper, "grammar" refers to issues of morphosyntactic form: e.g., agreement, word order or sentence structure, as well as inflection for tense, aspect, number, person, etc. (i.e., inflectional morphology, or inflection which does not result in a change of part of speech).

⁸ Shaolan's paper was already strong, having been revised after a previous visit to the writing center. This could have affected the tutorial in terms of the attention paid to sentence-level, as opposed to text-level or more global issues. The point I wish to emphasize here is that the sentence-level issues addressed were related to lexis, not grammar. This was true for Aki's session as well, but the pattern in the US-educated students' sessions was just the opposite.

including synonyms, does relate to a lexical need that Aki explicitly stated (see discussion below on lexical flexibility).

US-educated students and their tutors addressed grammatical issues relatively more often than the international students, and they discussed grammar more often than lexical issues in their own sessions. In fact, both students explicitly indicated at the outset of their sessions that they wanted to talk about grammar. Nine sequences out of 25, or 36% of the total sequences in Li's sessions addressed grammar. In Jet's session, grammatical feedback represented 37% of the total (10 out of 27 sequences). This seemed consistent with the students' strengths and needs as writers; they needed more help with making their sentences conform to standard written grammatical conventions. The fact that they could express their ideas more or less clearly and fluently may have freed their tutor up to spend some time on correcting morphosyntactic errors or teaching rules for writing in standard written English.

Both tutors and students initiated feedback sequences in the tutorials. The fact that there was a difference in the relative amount of attention paid to lexical and grammatical issues in the sessions with international and US-educated students suggests that both tutors and students may be responding to a more or less accurate intuition of the students' needs; i.e., although there is not much mention of lexical issues in writing center discourse, tutors nevertheless provided feedback on lexical issues in a way that seemed proportional to the students' needs.

Research question #2

What lexical strengths and needs do the students exhibit during tutorials? Are there any differences between tutorials with international and US-educated students?

Three categories of lexical strengths and needs were observed in this study: *facility* (ease and fluency in putting words together idiomatically), *flexibility* (access to alternatives), and *intuition* (ability to judge what "sounds right" or what does not). Excerpts from tutorial data illustrating these categories are presented and discussed below. The US-educated participants demonstrated greater strengths in all three of these areas than the international student participants did. At the same time, as ear learners, they occasionally lacked awareness of the particular ways that written words differ from spoken words, e.g., spelling differences among homophones.

The most common issue addressed in the international students' tutorials was a lack of *lexical facility* or expressive ability in English, often due specifically to a lack of vocabulary. In the following example, Teresa offers Shaolan a new word that will better express her meaning and, perhaps, expand her English lexicon:

Excerpt 6:

T: OK. You say "The message that this photo delivers is so strong that I cannot wipe IT away from my eyes," it's like, is it that you can't wipe the message away, or you can't wipe, wipe the photo away, or, um,

Sh: So, is it like, I have to

T: I would substitute this for an actual noun. So you want it to refer to the photo, but, you know, you don't want to be saying "photo photo photo photo." Um, so, (.....) OK, one word that might be helpful, (writes on the paper) um, when you're writing about a photograph? Is the word "image."

More than once, Shaolan explicitly told Teresa that she had a hard time finding the right word to express her intended meaning in English, as in:

Excerpt 7:

Sh: Um, the, like, these ones I don't know, but here, when I was trying to depict image [uh huh] and that kind of things here, I know that I'm, I'm WRONG but I don't know how to find a correct word for that.

During her interview with me, Shaolan identified a lack of vocabulary as one of her main challenges in writing in English. For Shaolan, this seemed to be directly tied to her ability to express herself satisfactorily in English—a problem she did not have in Chinese. In the following tutorial excerpt, Shaolan drew on her expressive ability in Chinese to expand her productive ability in English:

Excerpt 8:

Sh: Well actually, what I'm trying to say is like, um, (..) um, I don't know how to say that in English but in Chinese there's a really um, good, depiction or meaning, like [mm hmm] um, I'm telling, their survival is based on, OUR, sacrifice. [mm hmm] I don't know how to say that.

The feedback sequence continued with Shaolan asking for feedback on the use or connotation of the word “sacrifice.” She knew that the word is sometimes used to describe an intentional act of bravery or courage, and did not want to give that “color” to her sentence (her intended meaning was something like “the survival of one at the expense of another”). Thus, Shaolan not only solicited new English words, but sought to expand her understanding of those words to include more subtle nuances.

Shaolan often used the wrong part of speech for the words she chose, showing a lack of *intuition* about word formation. She was always able to self-correct when Teresa alerted her, as in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 9:

T: (T reads under her breath for 15 seconds) All right, so the -ly ones are the, um, adverbs. [Yeah.] And, but you're just modifying a noun, so you want the adjective. [Oh, “heavy”?] Mm hmm. [OK.] (Sh writes on the paper.)

This example shows Shaolan using her strength in grammatical analysis and knowledge of terminology to compensate for a lexical weakness (consistently using the wrong form of words, and lacking intuition that the word is wrong).

Like Shaolan, Aki demonstrated a need for greater lexical facility. This was evident from her writing, from her difficulty in communicating with Danielle during the session, and from her own expressions of such difficulty in her interview with me. In her session, Danielle often pointed out errors in lexical usage, e.g., “users friendly” instead of “user friendly” and “reasons I picked up this website” instead of “reasons I picked this website.” Sometimes Aki coined words that fit grammatically into her sentences, and were even comprehensible, but were unidiomatic; e.g., “Without a good quality of usability, users might feel stressed to netsurf website.”⁹

Aki also demonstrated a lack of *lexical flexibility*, or ability to access alternative ways to express herself in English. She confessed to Danielle that she “always say[s] ‘According to X. . .’” when introducing quotations, since she did not know any other way to do so in English. This lack of flexibility resulted in repetitiveness in her writing and caused her frustration.

In fact, both international students in this study expressed frustration at their lexical limitations. Part of the difficulty in expressing themselves lay in simply having less productive language at their disposal; however, the difficulty was compounded by the frustration at realizing the gap between what they could accomplish in their first language and what they could accomplish in English. Shaolan and Aki were older and both had attended some college in their home countries. In other words, they were more mature both in terms of age and academic experience and also in terms of L1 literacy. They had the desire and expectation to accomplish more sophisticated writing tasks with less language available to them to do so. Their task, it seemed, was in acquiring more (and more idiomatic) English so that they could make use of academic writing skills they already had in their L1.

It is not surprising, then, that the international students focused more on lexical issues in their sessions than the US-educated students, who had more lexical choices immediately available to them and perhaps more modest rhetorical or academic goals for the particular text they were working on at the time. US-educated participants, indeed, did not feel they had a lack of vocabulary and their texts showed relatively greater lexical facility. When they did use the wrong word, they sometimes substituted a word that sounds similar to the appropriate one or confused homophones, reflecting the influence of their (oral-based) lexical intuition. On the other hand, this intuition seemed to afford them considerably superior ability to detect and self-correct lexical errors on their own. For these students, lexical feedback served more as a showcase for their strengths than for their weaknesses. Though there were very few instances of lexical feedback in Jet’s session, in the following, he displayed his flexibility in accessing alternative words to express his ideas:

⁹ “Lexical” here relates to form and meaning at the level of the word. The errors noted here are lexical because they involve an error internal to a lexical item (“users friendly” is not violating a rule of grammar, but it is not the correct way to form the compound adjective that means “easy to use”), choosing the wrong word (“picked up” instead of “picked,” which has a different meaning), or a problem with idiomaticity (“quality of usability” and “netsurf website” are basically grammatical, despite the missing article in the latter, but these are not idiomatic phrases in English). None of these errors would be fruitfully addressed by discussing rules of English grammar.

Excerpt 10:

T: It can be anything, even really simple. Well, like um (.....) Like, according, well, you don't want to say "according to Newman's selection" aGAIN. But uh (...)

J: So blah blah blah SAID.

T: Yeah. Anything like that. She (...) Um (...) [J: addresses, emphasizes] reports, yeah. Some word like that.

Li also showed flexibility in terms of being able to access lexical alternatives:

Excerpt 11:

L: "The second sociological theory is the conflict theory created by Karl Max (sic). The conflict theorists view the socio, the society is always problematic. The problem is mainly focused on the class difference {omits 's'}, which the rich people try to get richer and the poor get poorer. In this theory, money is power." (...) How about, like, "according to this theory"?

Li's intuitive ear for English sometimes resulted in written errors. When feedback addressed lexical errors in his text, they were usually related to the difference between spoken and written English. Like the native-speaking basic writer who produces "should of" instead of "should have," Li's knowledge of oral English came through in his written text. More than once, Li substituted a word that sounded similar to one that would have been appropriate in the given context. For example, he substituted the word "responded" for "responsible" in his paper. During the session, he was able to orally explain exactly what he meant, showing his greater facility with spoken than written English.

The following two excerpts demonstrate Li's oral intuition. In the first, Li reads his own text, omitting the (extraneous) plural -s markers that are printed on the page. The resulting spoken words are identical to the actual "correct" words that he intended to write, though he made spelling errors when writing them down. This excerpt also shows Li spontaneously correcting a word choice error. Reading the sentence aloud may have helped him access his oral/aural intuition about what form of the word was needed.

Excerpt 12:

L: "The compliance {omits 's'} are the people who agree to work within the conflict. The deviance {omits 's'} are the people who give power away by stealing from others. As described above, it was kind of like the boss and employee relation" (.) {ship. Relationship.} (Li writes on paper.) [T: (nodding) Good.]

Excerpt 13:

T: "I did not have enough patients (lines 9-10)." That is exactly how we say that, but this is patients like patients in a hospital. [L: yeah (...) (looks up at ceiling) patients (...)] So, (writes 'patience' in line 10) this is the part that's different.

L: Oh. It's a noun.

T: Yeah. Well, they're both nouns, but, with the exact same pronunciation but with different meanings. This, these, stuff like this is always hard, because Microsoft Word doesn't see it, you know? Microsoft Word is like, "Patients (...) that's fine, that's spelled right." So that's why you need an extra pair of eyes.

Li knew the word that expressed his intended meaning. He knew how his chosen word sounds and knew that the letter *s* represents the final sound in the word. However, he lacked the intuition that the word written as "patients" contains a plural marker. In this excerpt, Teresa articulated Li's need to develop his eye for how words look on the page.

Despite making errors that result from an imperfect translation of oral English to written English, the US-educated L2 writers in this study showed considerable lexical strengths both in their writing and in their tutorials. It is not clear whether this is the result of knowing a greater total number of words (than the international students), having a greater proportion of their total vocabulary available for productive use, or having a more intuitive understanding of the ways that words in English work together. Whatever the reason, it is likely to be related to their experience of interactive ear learning, in which lexical items are encountered in context, and in which there are many opportunities for production and negotiation of meaning. These strengths should not be overlooked in writing center tutorials.

Research question #3

How do the tutors characterize linguistic aspects of the students' texts? Do they accurately articulate the nature of the feedback they provided on linguistic aspects of the students' texts?

As noted above, tutors in this study intuitively responded to students' lexical needs during the sessions, particularly in sessions with the international students. However, in their post-tutorial reflections, they talked about student texts, and their own feedback to students about these texts, in terms of two broad categories: "content" and "grammar." Both tutors repeatedly used these terms when reflecting on their sessions, either to characterize (sometimes inaccurately) the feedback they had or had not given, or to talk about tutoring in general. They very rarely mentioned students' lexical issues or the lexical feedback they themselves had provided. The following excerpt shows how Danielle explained to me what she had worked on with Aki in a previous session:

Excerpt 14:

D: Because in the LAST session I had had her last week, we focused a bit more on content and focused more on grammar, punctu- uh, not punctuation, um, just grammar stuff like prepositions she was concerned about, and idiomatic expressions.

Teresa also showed evidence of the "content and grammar" model of tutoring when she reflected on her session with Shaolan:

Excerpt 15:

T: She said she wanted to work on grammar [mm hmm] she said she wanted to proofread the paper. But then she, she sort of contradicted herself by just asking a lot of questions about content. So, which is good [yeah].

From my own perspective content and grammar had been discussed relatively infrequently in this session. In fact, Shaolan seemed very sure of the content and ideas in her paper, and the two talked mainly about how to express those ideas in English with better word choice and more accurate word formation.

In other words, tutors in this study were less likely to reflect on or articulate students' lexical needs, instead characterizing all linguistic feedback as relating to grammar. In the case of the US-educated students' tutorials, this characterization was perhaps more accurate, since these tutorials did address grammatical issues more often than lexical issues. However, there was a mismatch between the actual feedback given in the international students' tutorials and the way the tutors articulated the nature of the feedback. This may reflect tutors' inability to distinguish the ways that grammatical and lexical choices affect texts; i.e., they may conflate the two and (therefore) lack strategies for addressing the latter. In fact, there is a general sentiment that tutors should not "give words" to students, for fear of appropriating their texts or raising suspicions of plagiarism.

In terms of strategies for addressing grammar or sentence-level errors in student texts, writing center tutors are often instructed to look for patterns of error in the texts of L2 writers rather than to attend to individual errors or problematic sentences. In her post-tutorial interview, Teresa expressed anxiety at being unable to identify and alert Li to a pattern of error:

Excerpt 16:

T: And then, I guess um, in the way of (. . .) things, that, I WASN'T sure if they went well? It's just that his paper was already pretty good, and so I felt like a lot of the things that we talked about were just, idiosyncratic? [mm hmm] His mistakes weren't necessarily falling into a pattern that I could identify at least. Um, so I was, I felt bad that I wasn't necessarily, like, bringing attention to his PATterns of error? But just saying, 'oh, this sounds awkward,' [mm hmm] 'so, can you rephrase this,' and then, but lucky for me, he usually COULD rephrase it? In a way that was a big improvement? So, it worked out.

The idea of a pattern of error implies that understanding and being able to apply a single systematic rule will help the student to correct (or avoid making) multiple errors violating that rule. This encourages tutors to focus on teaching rules, and may obscure the nature of problems that are not actually amenable to rules. Indeed, this preoccupation with finding and explaining rule-based errors may have affected the feedback Teresa provided to Li, as in the following example:

Excerpt 17:

T: All right, how about this one? This sentence confused me a little bit. “Manager was responded for providing functional computers as promised when he got paid.”

L: I’m kind of like trying to explain that the manager’s role is to (...) when he gets the money (...) he got paid for the computer that he should like give the consumers the working computers, not dysfunctional.

T: Ahhh. (nods) Oh, all right. (pause, looks at paper) OK, let’s start with, let’s start looking at the verbs. First, you have, here you have a passive voice construction—“was responded.”

L: Just cross out the “was.” “The manager responded.”

T: (...) Hmm. (...) “The manager was responded.” “Responded,” meaning (...) answered? The manager was *answered* for providing functional computers? That’s not quite what you mean, I think.

L: Responded (...) I was trying to get like a vocabulary for “responsibility,” like, his responsibility is to provide. (...)

T: All right, good. So, the (...) adjective form of responsibility? “Responsible.” (writes “responsible.”)

Just prior to this sequence in the session, Teresa had modeled for Li that the way to eliminate inappropriate passive voice constructions is to get rid of the extraneous “was.” Looking for a pattern of error caused Teresa to seek out similar violations of passive voice formation, limiting her ability to see Li’s error as one of word choice (influenced by the similar sounds of the two words). Of course, the feedback was not effective, and initially Li seemed to have forgotten his own intended meaning in an attempt to correct his mistake, resulting in a sentence that was neither grammatically correct nor made sense.

The tutors in this study seem to have internalized the bias in writing center discourse toward characterizing language in terms of “grammar,” despite paying much attention to lexical issues in their actual sessions. In one instance, this orientation negatively affected the tutor’s feedback. A tutor’s decision to frame a problem in grammar terms, or to address grammatical aspects of a paper over other aspects, might have to do with the tutor’s belief that the L2 writer wants feedback on grammar. Alternatively, it might have to do with the tutor’s confidence in her own knowledge of English grammar. A tutor in Ritter’s (2002) dissertation “fell back on grammar” when she was not sure what to do in a tutorial (p. 230). Perhaps if tutors had more information about the ways lexical strengths and needs affect students’ writing, and how to contend with these during sessions, they would feel more empowered to talk about lexical issues, and would do so more effectively.

Conclusion

Like all qualitative research, the present study aims not for generalizable experimental results, but rather to examine the experiences of particular people in particular contexts as they engage in authentic activities. The findings presented here cannot be said to be generalizable to other students or contexts. It is also important to keep in mind that the student participants diverged in a number of ways other than the factor I foreground here (country of high-school education). Perhaps most important for this study, the age and academic maturity of the student participants varied greatly. Both US-educated students were 18 years old and in their first year of college, while the international students were older (24 and 39) and had both completed some college previously in their home countries. These differences make a straightforward comparison of the students impossible. Coding of feedback sequences in the tutorial data was conducted entirely by the researcher, so lack of reliability must be acknowledged.

This small-scale study contributes to a growing body of work that is beginning to fill in the details of existing general descriptions of international and US-educated multilingual writers. Detailed profiles of actual individual students, including their own voices as they express their particular attitudes and frustrations, contribute to a greater understanding and awareness of the sources of difficulty and strengths for students from different backgrounds. For example, one of the primary differences typically highlighted is oral proficiency. The findings from this study suggest that, in addition to (or perhaps as a component of) oral proficiency, US-educated students possess key strengths in lexical facility, flexibility, and intuition, in both oral and written contexts. Like Ritter and Sandvik (2009), I am convinced that tutors’ perceptions of needs or challenges must not “overshadow our awareness of Generation 1.5 learners’ particular *strengths* in a bridged perspective on language, writing, and

culture” (p. 103). These findings also suggest that lexical facility, flexibility, and intuition are positive effects of ear learning that might be fostered in or capitalized upon in a setting like writing centers, which bring together the oral and the written.

The findings presented here also point to questions for future research about the ways that writing center tutors perceive the linguistic aspects of L2 writers' papers, the ways they intuit particular students' needs, and the ways they attend to these. For example, more attention was paid to lexis than to grammar in the international students' sessions, reflecting, in part, an accurate intuition of the students' needs. Despite this, the tutors characterized the feedback they provided in the session in terms of “content” and “grammar,” almost completely failing to articulate the lexical needs of the students. This orientation may be the result of internalizing the ways writing center discourse in general treats students' language needs. It might be related to a fear of appropriating texts or voices by “giving students words” or “putting words into students' mouths.” Staben and Nordhaus (2009) posit that tutors “shy away from discussing ideas because they don't want to offend the student; grammar is safe, neutral territory, whereas ideas are potentially explosive minefields filled with personal beliefs and values” (p. 81). Perhaps focusing on the “neutral territory” of grammar is seen as safer than the potentially appropriating territory of words.

In general, writing center philosophy de-emphasizes attention to grammar and local errors. Ironically, however, the advice that tutors look for “patterns of error” in the texts of multilingual writers may be subtly biasing tutors toward addressing exactly such aspects, i.e., correct grammar rather than more effective expression of ideas. Editing is a valuable skill, but a focus on finding and correcting errors can potentially limit the discussion to how to “clean up” what is already there. Worse, a focus on finding and correcting grammatical errors has consequences for writing center tutorials when the nature of the errors is not, in fact, grammatical, as was demonstrated in this study. What this suggests is not that tutors should abandon the strategy of finding patterns of error, but rather that the discourse must be expanded to include more discussion of the ways lexical issues affect texts, and the ways that tutors can respond to these issues.

Indeed, the findings presented here suggest that some multilingual writers' biggest needs are lexical in nature, as suggested by Myers (2003). These students require scaffolding in expressing what they want to say in the first place, e.g., by providing appropriate vocabulary or modeling the use of idiomatic lexical chunks and sentence patterns. These expressive needs are unlikely to fall into a discernible, rule-based pattern. I hope that this research contributes to a greater understanding of the ways that a lack of lexical facility, flexibility, and intuition affect students' ability to create meaningful, effective texts and express themselves in the precise and nuanced way that is valued in academic writing. I add my voice to those that call for empowering tutors to respond to L2 writers' language needs, including lexical needs, in addition to the “higher order concerns” in their writing.

Understanding the various ways language affects L2 writers' texts is important in understanding the nature of the strengths and weaknesses of the writer, thus in providing appropriate feedback. Different sources of difficulty likely require different pedagogical priorities and practices. This is certainly important in a US higher education context, given the increasing presence of multilingual writers from diverse backgrounds. However, teachers and learners in other contexts, e.g., international and foreign language, also benefit from a greater awareness and understanding of how oral feedback can use particular student strengths to address challenges from different sources. In addition, there is a need for further research in these contexts on the nature of interactive ear learning and its potential lexical benefits, both oral and written.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers, as well as the editors, who provided insightful feedback to help improve this article. I am also grateful to my BMCC colleague John Beaumont for his feedback. The work reported here was supported by grants from the International Writing Centers Association and New York University.

Appendix A

Background Questionnaire

Name: _____ E-mail address: _____
 Male / Female Age: ____ Years in U.S.: ____ Semester at Madison College: 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / other
 Country of birth: _____
 Other classes currently taking: _____

Educational Background:

1. Please check any of the following that apply (you may check more than one):

- I graduated from a high school in the US
- I graduated from a high school in another country (country name : _____)
- I graduated from college in another country

2. How many years of school did you attend in the US and/or another country?

	# of years in US	# of years in another country
elementary school		
middle school		
high school		
college		

Language Background:

1. Native language(s): _____

2. How often do you do the following activities in your languages?

	Always in English	More in English	More in another language	Always in another language
Talk to family in my home				
Talk to family who don't live in my home				
Talk to friends				
Watch movies/TV				
Listen to the radio				
Read books for school				
Read books for fun				
Read newspapers				
Write papers for school (HS and college)				
Write letters, poetry, stories, e-mail, etc. for fun				

3. How do you feel about speaking, listening, reading, and writing in your languages?

	Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing
More comfortable in English				
More comfortable in another language				
Equally comfortable in both languages				

Appendix B. Transcription conventions

The following transcription conventions (from Atkinson, 2005) were used in transcribing video and audio data for this study:

- , Short pause
- (.) Longer pause
- (. . .) Pauses roughly counted as seconds
- . Falling intonation followed by a pause
- ? Rising intonation followed by a pause
- : Vowel lengthening
- CAPITAL LETTERS Emphasis marked by stress, volume, voice quality, or raised intonation (note: when the first person personal pronoun *I* receives special stress it is bounded by asterisks)
- () (1) Transcriber doubt (parentheses can be filled or unfilled); (2) “stage directions,” e.g., (both laugh), (picks up pen), etc.
- [] Overlapping, short turns, or back-channeling speech within another speaker’s longer turn
- “ ” Speaker reading verbatim from text
- { } Student or tutor reads aloud something that deviates from the actual written text; e.g., reads “with {the} terrible working environment” for “with terrible working environment.”

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