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Culturally Competent Strategies for Tutoring Writing with International ELL Students

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Sara Petersen

Culturally Competent Strategies for Tutoring Writing with International ELL Students

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Title Slide

Welcome: A brief overview about what will be discussed and what participants can take away •

“International ELL students face a variety of unique challenges that require writing tutors to adjust their approaches to tutoring. In our short time together, I will review some of the many academic and cultural barriers that international ELL students experience in university writing centers as well as culturally competent strategies tutors can implement when working with this population.”

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Introduction and Roles

- Name, School, Year, Experience in Undergraduate Studies
 - Tutor: Assist students in the areas of writing, spanish, communication sciences and disorders
 - Peer Mentor: Course-embedded mentor within a first year introductory writing and research class; focus on adjusting to college, connecting students to resources etc.
- Ask participants to introduce themselves: Name, school, roles in peer education

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First, let me tell you about the TLC at the University of Northern Iowa

- Free, walk-in tutoring center for all UNI students. The center is open 10-10 Monday through Thursday and has tutors for a wide variety of subjects, such as math, science, business, Spanish, French, computer science, academic coaching, and of course writing. • Located in the middle of the on-campus library
- We see undergraduate students of all ages and educational backgrounds, including international students

To start, who exactly are international ELL students?

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We'll begin with a quick terminology overview for our conversation today. I'll be using these terms a lot, so let's define them before we continue.

- International Student: A student studying abroad for any amount of time (in our case today, at a US university).

- English Language Learner(s): A student whose native language(s) are not English, and they're still learning English.
- International ELL Student: A student who is studying abroad in the US AND learning English
- Cultural Competence: According to Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Cultural competency means being aware of your own cultural beliefs and values and how these may be different from other cultures—including being able to learn about and honor the different cultures of those you work with." ("Cultural competency", 2009).

The next question, then, is why do we as writing tutors and peer educators need to learn about this population? I'll give you an example.

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Case Study Pt. 1

- A student walks up to you in the writing center. She tells you she's an international student from Kenya and English is her third language. She needs help starting a research paper about the Harlem Renaissance for a theater class, and this is the first research paper she has had to write in the US so far.
- What's your first question? (Allow for discussion)

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Case Study Pt. 2

- My first question: what topic have you chosen for your paper, and do you have a thesis? - I see multiple students each semester for this project
- She had 3 main questions for me
 1. How do I find the directions for the assignment and what do they mean?
 2. How do I change my spacing in Google Docs?
 3. What exactly is the Harlem Renaissance?
- What do you start with? (Allow for discussion)

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Prevalence of international students in the US

- In 2016, international students studying in the United States exceeded a million for the first time (Institute for Higher Education, 2019, as cited in Curtis, 2020, p. 1)
- Reasons for studying abroad are numerous
 - Academic opportunities, job prospects, family influence, geographical location, media advertisement (Curtis, 2020, p. 1)
 - Chinese students have been the highest rising population of international ELL students for years (Institution of International Education, as cited in Nan, 2012, p.

51)

- As a result, we're seeing more international ELL students in writing centers looking for support. Tutors should note that the approach to help these students is different than with domestic students

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Tutoring domestic students. In order to see the differences between tutoring domestic and international students, we need to have an idea of what an average session looks like with a native English speaker from the US.

- My typical session usually looks like this:
 - Hi! My name is Sara. What can I help you with today? The student usually answers, telling me about a paper or assignment for a certain class.
 - a. Their assignment is already written: If they don't already have the assignment pulled up, I ask to read it, along with a rubric if there is one. Then, I ask them what they want me to look for throughout the assignment and make comments accordingly, focusing on the thesis, flow, mechanics, and citations.
 - b. They don't know where to start: Read over the assignment with them and discuss the thesis, main body paragraphs, and a potential hook or introduction.
 - Usually domestic students are familiar with basic paper structure and terminology because they have that educational background in the US going through middle and high school.

Unfortunately, because of the differences, there are many academic barriers students new to the US experience.

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Academic Barrier: Educational background differences influence success in US universities.

- Students' educational background varies, including their level of English spoken, different experiences with formal writing and citation, and academic rigor
- Since every country is vastly different, we are going to use Chinese international ELL students as an example
 - Chinese students have had some English classes, but the majority of language learning relies on rote memorization of vocabulary lists and basic grammar (Nan, 2012, p. 52)
 - If anyone has taken an oral communication course in a foreign language, we know how different conversational communication is from memorizing vocabulary words

- Every student's level of English is going to be different. This impacts how complex tutors' explanations can be and requires linguistic flexibility in order to ensure that the student understands the message the tutor is trying to convey

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Another academic barrier is the cognitive skill level required to write functionally. - Many international students come from countries that do not emphasize research and critical thinking in academia, specifically in writing (Safipour et. al, 2017, as cited in Curtis, 2020, p. 5; Brendel, 2012, p. 78).

- Critical thinking is foundational in US universities. In almost every class I have personally taken at the college level, I have been required to write papers synthesizing information, analyzing research, and reflecting on my own thoughts and experiences.
- Cognitive skills (adequate critical thinking skills) as well as writing proficiency is the number one contributing factor for international student success in US universities (Curtis, 2020, p. 6).
 - However, these students are still not prepared: Some example Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) questions are: "Would you agree/disagree that parents are the best teachers?" and "Would you agree/disagree that television has destroyed communication between friends and family?" (Nan, 2012, p. 53).
 - In order to study in the US, international ELL students are required to pass this standardized test. Think the SAT.
 - These students have to navigate assignments that ask for analysis and synthesis of complex topics, which is a natural challenge based on their educational background

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Academic barrier: Besides foundational cognitive skills, mechanics, format, and structure- the technical stuff, is another academic challenge

- At the word level, ELL student papers are prone to having "awkward phrasing, unidiomatic speech, and, at times, the loss of semantic meaning" (Brendel, 2012, p. 79).
 - Idiomatic language is difficult to explain to non native speakers, and yet another hurdle to jump when writing fluently and understanding written, academic English.
 - Additionally, since these students are not yet fluent, the actual content meaning of the paper may make little sense.

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Spanish: Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente

Literal meaning: a shrimp that falls asleep, it's taken away by the current.

Actual meaning: pay attention or the opportunities will pass you by.

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- At a structural level, essays from around the world follow different structures • The five paragraph essay is a classic in the US. We have an introduction (with a thesis in the last sentence or two), 3+ (sometimes 2) body paragraphs with topic sentences that connect to the thesis, and then a conclusion that summarizes the content of the paper.
- However, a few years ago, an Italian international student brought me her paper. She had written it in the format she was familiar with. Her sentences were long and considered “run on” in English, and she included footnotes scattered throughout her reflection. Her explanations were flowery and circled around the point, instead of being direct. This did not mean she was a weak writer- in fact, she normally scored quite high in her composition courses in Italy. Her writing experience is simply different
- Looking at another perspective, Chinese students usually use very little persuasion or argumentation (a cultural expectation). The essay builds up to the main point, requiring the reader to ponder what the author is building up to until the thesis at the very end of the paper.

(Brendel, 2012)

If tutors are unaware of these stylistic differences, they may not understand why a student writes the way they do, assuming that their writing skills are poor instead of just different

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Cultural barriers also influence a tutoring session when working with international students. - The National College Learning Center Association (2008) conducted a study looking at who dominated 1:1 peer tutoring sessions, the tutor, or the international student. Initially, tutors in the study thought they dominated the sessions. However, the study actually found that the overall dominance was relatively equal in a session (Bell & Elledge) • The time-at-talk was significantly higher for tutors versus their students because of the amount of explanation they have to give (Bell & Elledge, 2008)

- ELL students took control of the agenda, even it drastically varied from what the tutor expected
 - Session expectations often differ because international ELL students often focus on mechanics and proofreading, even if the tutor wants to focus on more global, structural edits (Bell & Elledge, 2008).

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Another cultural barrier might include how students interact with a peer tutor in regards to their perceived authority.

- First, clarity in language is key. Americans, especially Iowans, often ‘hedge’. For example, “you might want to change this sentence” or “this is kind of a weaker thesis”. In some cultures, words like this convey uncertainty or vague suggestions (Nan, 2012, p. 55)
- When working with international students, being direct will take you further. ●

Let’s go back to our example with the Chinese students.

- In Chinese culture, a student is less likely to interact with a tutor casually because even though they are a peer, they are also someone in an “authority” position (Nan, 2012, p. 55)
- As a result, they won’t outwardly disagree with something a tutor says and let them make all the decisions
- This becomes a problem when attempting to collaborate on an assignment or brainstorm together.

Now, let’s get into some strategies. What can we do to support these international ELL students?

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Strategies

- **In order for any student to be supported, they need to be seen.** Understanding the cultural/linguistic backgrounds of students we see is one way to acknowledge that their experiences/perspectives are likely different from our own
- Usually, a lot of peer education programs train their students to use an inquiry-based approach to tutoring- the revision is facilitated by the tutor, but the student ultimately takes control of their session (Brendel, 2012)
- Additionally, from a monolingual perspective, tutors should just use translation and focus on the big picture of the assignment (Brendel, 2012, p. 82).
 - In practice, this doesn’t work
- Christian Brendel suggests an alternative recommendation. He developed a method called Comparative Multilingual Tutoring, or CMT (Brendel, 2012).
 - CMT allows the writers to draw comparisons between their native language and English and allows the student to focus on smaller pieces of language (Brendel, 2012, p. 82). Brendel uses the example of a Portuguese student figuring out translations for “for” in English in connection to “por” and “para”
 - Alternatively, in past inquiry-based models, students would have to hear the information in English, translate it and process it mentally to their native language, translate the response back to English and repeat.
 - This system allows students to build a strong foundation in English no matter their level from word level up.

- Lastly, it requires students to have some level of linguistic knowledge pertaining to the language that the student speaks.

My second strategy, while maybe simple, is just as impactful as CMT or any other academic method.

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Building a connection with students through small talk facilitates collaboration. Earlier, we mentioned that Chinese students do not see sessions as collaborative (Nan, 2012). In regards to tutoring session dominance, we've talked about how ELL students usually set the agenda, and it typically varies a lot from what the tutor expects (Bell & Elledge, 2008).

- Research has found that starting a conversation with small talk helps (Nan, 2012). ● This allows for a peer to peer relationship to be formed. Many students are more likely to disagree with or question a peer, if they are not perceived to be in a high authority (Nan, 2012).
- Additionally, by getting to know the student more personally, you may be able to connect students with other resources around campus
- Plus, they're probably more likely to return if they've made a strong connection with a tutor.

So, how do we begin to implement these ideas and models in our own peer education programs? Here are a few recommendations to start.

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Recommendation for Implementation

- International ELL student speaker for tutoring staff
 - From a student perspective, how can tutors best support international students? What is something these students wish their tutors knew? How does their educational system back home vary from the US system?
 - After the speaker, the peer education department could provide some mock essays to edit and revise, exposing students to what an international ELL student's paper may look like
- Repeating sessions
 - Essay writing is difficult for everyone, but especially if English is not your first language. By coming back, students can build a relationship with the tutor and consistently work on foundational ELA/writing topics

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Discussion Question: Think back on the Kenyan student from the beginning of this conversation.

How can we better support her?

- After a few minutes of discussion...

Here are my thoughts

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Suggestions for Support

- Be direct with feedback
- Make a lasting, continuous connection
- Follow an evidence-based approach
- Educate yourself and other tutors about working with international ELL students - Ask for support from other resources around campus

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We've made it!

- Looking back on our discussion today, we've explored some background, barriers, and strategies for working with international ELL students. It is essential for writing tutors to use culturally competent approaches when working with this population to help them succeed both academically and professionally in the US.

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Questions?

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