

# UNDERGRADUATE SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS IN THE WRITING CENTER

*ABSTRACT: The number of second language writers in composition classes and seeking assistance at university writing centers is growing every year. Yet, relatively little attention has been paid in composition studies or the writing center literature to the challenges that these writers face. In the writing center, tutors who work with these writers also face an enormous challenge if they do so without adequate preparation and knowledge. This article explores some important insights offered by second language acquisition research, focusing in particular on the findings of interactional and Vygotskian approaches. Finally, it argues that writing centers may be an ideal place for second language writers to work on their writing.*

Sue Kang's psychology professor advised her to come to the writing center for "help with prepositions and articles." Lu's composition instructor wondered if she were in the right class and suggested she go to the writing center for "extra help." Farad came in on his own for help with "ideas and grammar." Writers like these often come or are sent to the writing center when their instructors simply do not know what else to do with them. In part, this may be due to the fact that, at many institutions, composition instructors receive little preparation in how to work with second language writers and still less, any background in theories of second language learning (Kennedy; Williams, "Program Administration"). Instructors may send their undergraduate second language writers to the writing center at best, out of frustration, (Thonus, "Tutors" 14; Zamel 506) and at worst, because they don't think dealing with second language problems is part of their job (Zamel 509). It may be assumed that, since second language writers are in college, their language proficiency is no longer an issue; their language problems have somehow been taken care of before matriculation.

In spite of their visibility at writing centers, second language writers do not get much attention in the writing center literature. Indeed, they are not even mentioned in Boquet's recent history of writing centers. There has been a handful of articles on the topic in the

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past fifteen years (e.g., Cogie, Strain and Lorinksas; Friedlander; Gadbow; Harris and Silva; Kennedy; Moser; Powers; Ronesi; Thonus "Tutors"), but most of these are limited to cautious advice or do's and don'ts for working with second language writers. Very few give second language acquisition research more than a passing mention. Nor has ESL writing research received much attention in the mainstream composition literature (see Matsuda; Silva, Leki and Carson). This article explores some of the problems faced by second language writers, identifies some fundamental findings from the field of second language acquisition, and argues that this knowledge can inform interactions between these learners and their teachers and tutors.

It has been suggested that the writing center is an ideal place to address the problems and challenges of second language writing. Ronesi points to the common theory, goals and approaches of composition pedagogy and writing center practice. She also suggests that the extra time and attention that second language writers need to complete assignments are often not available in class or from their teachers, and that writing centers are by nature, focused on the individual. Muriel Harris, in a study of second language writers in the writing center, reported that they perceived tutors to be "immediately more helpful, more approachable, more practical and more personal than teachers" ("Cultural Conflicts" 223). Recent thinking points to a central role for writing centers, one that suggests a reciprocal relationship with composition instructors. Tassoni and Harris ("Middle") both argue that the writing center does not simply provide supplementary instruction; often it is a site of primary learning. This may be a particularly fruitful perspective for second language writers.

Regardless of whether it is, in principle, appropriate or effective for second language writers to use the resources of the writing center, they are an inevitable and significant part of the writing center clientele. According to many in the field, second language writers are coming in increasing numbers and there is no indication that this trend will end soon (Carter-Tod; Powers; Ronesi). It is therefore essential for writing center professionals to review what is known about their second language writer clients and to inform themselves about how they might better serve this population. The first and most important step is to acknowledge openly that second language writers are not only learning to write in a second language, they are learning a second language (Kroll; Harris and Silva 528-9). Although these are intertwined in practice, in fact, they are different processes. Learning a language is not the same thing as learning to write in that language.

## The Writers

The second language writers who come to writing centers do not have a monolithic profile. They come from a variety of social, linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds; and they have different goals for their long-term educational and professional development and for their sessions in the writing center. However, a broad and crucial distinction can be made between international students and permanent residents/citizens (Leki, Understanding; Reid). Harklau, Losey and Siegal maintain that it is the second group that has been the major source of the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity on today's college campuses (2), and by extension, at writing centers. At some universities and colleges, the majority of second language writers are international students who, ostensibly, will return to their own countries when their education is complete. Some, though by no means all, have good educational backgrounds and considerable experience writing in their first language. In contrast, at a large number of universities and colleges, especially urban public institutions, permanent residents and citizens predominate. Many of these bilingual and second language writers are members of what has been characterized as *Generation 1.5* because of "traits and experiences that lie somewhere between those associated with the first and second generation." (Harklau, Losey and Siegal, vii). Perhaps the most important point about this group is that the United States is their home, and for many, the only home they remember. Some are fluent in spoken English; many have little literacy experience in their home language, over which some have uncertain command. Their educational background and experience may overlap with those of their native English writer classmates. Yet, their writing shows many characteristics typical of second language learners.

Why do second language writers come to the writing center? First, there are the obvious reasons: either they or their instructors perceive that they need to improve their writing skills and/or their second language ability. Although in the writing center we are largely concerned with the former, it is important that the latter be addressed as well. Tutors tend to be more knowledgeable and confident about dealing with writing issues than language problems. For the latter, some tutors may refer second language writers to handbooks, which generally contain explanations of troublesome grammatical forms and sentence-level exercises. These measures are frequently frustratingly ineffective. Many second language writers are often already experts at the sentence-level drill, but this may have no apparent effect on their writing (Williams and Evans). Tutors may think that if they simply provide

an explanation, the student's performance should improve, and they become frustrated when this does not happen. There are several reasons for this.

- Second language acquisition, that is, the internalization and automatization of new linguistic knowledge, takes time, lots of time. It is unlikely to take place during a 50-minute writing center conference. Learning a new language is a slow, and like learning to write, a non-linear, sometimes recursive process.
- Learners must be developmentally ready to acquire what is being presented to them; teaching is no guarantee of learning.
- Metalinguistic knowledge, or rule knowledge, which is what often guides second language writers through sentence-level drills, does not guarantee implicit knowledge, which is what underlies accurate spontaneous language use.
- Not all aspects of language are learned in the same way; therefore, not all language errors are the same.

In addition to acquiring a new language, second language writers are entering a new discourse community, in which they must master many other skills. We witness their struggles with writing at the writing center, but depending on the background of the student, there may be other required tasks that are relatively unfamiliar. The biggest challenge at college for all second language writers is probably reading and engaging unfamiliar texts, extracting information and using it in creating their own texts (Spack "Acquisition," "Student"). At the writing center, tutors see the end, or sometimes, interim product of their struggle; however, it begins much earlier. For second language writers, academic reading itself can be an enormous challenge. Theories of interactive reading point to the interplay between top-down and bottom-up reading strategies. Bottom-up processing refers to the text-driven decoding of surface structures, in contrast to top-down processing, which emphasizes the overall construction of meaning, including the application of prior knowledge. Good readers use both strategies. Unfortunately, the bottom-up decoding skills of second language learners may be insufficient for the fluent reading that academic work requires (Grabe and Stoller, "Teaching"). They may decode slowly, word-by-word, often failing to make sense of the entire text. This is due in large part to their limited vocabulary, particularly, lower frequency academic vocabulary.

The connection between vocabulary and reading comprehension

in a second language is widely attested (Coady; Grabe and Stoller, "Reading"). Zeichmeister, D'Ana, Hall, Paus and Smith conservatively estimate that the average native speaking undergraduate has a vocabulary in the range of 14,000 to 17,000 words (203), suggesting that second language writers may need to increase their vocabulary size considerably in order to achieve academic success. One acknowledged way of increasing vocabulary in both the first and second language is through extensive reading. During reading, vocabulary is acquired incidentally, through inferencing and repeated exposure. However, the inferencing process is unlikely to be successful unless much of the text surrounding the unknown word is understood. It has been estimated that successful word inferencing from context occurs only when 98% of the other words in a text are familiar to the reader (Laufer; Nation and Coady). For second language learners, this ideal situation may be infrequent. Participants in a study by Parry, for example, guessed accurately only 12%-33% of the words from a college anthropology text that they listed as unfamiliar (639). In some cases, they listed words as unfamiliar, but did not bother to guess at all. This creates a cycle from which it is difficult for second language writers to break free: academic reading loads are onerous and completed slowly, and vocabulary acquisition is slow and erratic. Writing tasks based on such reading assignments can pose a tremendous challenge for these second language writers.

Once students have read assigned texts, they are often asked to respond to them, analyzing and synthesizing information, and constructing arguments. Numerous studies demonstrate the difficulty of this work, as well as the struggle that can result in charges of plagiarism against many second language writers (Currie). Second language writers often do not understand the difference between summary and analysis (Spack, "Acquisition" 31), and which and how much text can safely be included in their own writing. Indeed, second language writers receive conflicting messages regarding their reliance on material written by others. On the one hand, they are told to use their own words, but then are often penalized when they do so, leading them to pursue a strategy of "textual borrowing" (Currie 7). Such a strategy is often attributed to cultural differences in attitudes toward intellectual property, an aspect of contrastive rhetoric (Deckert; Matalene). Yet, this perspective is unlikely to explain the phenomenon in the writing of permanent residents, whose perceptions have been shaped by their American education. It is far more likely to be a result of second language writers' inexperience with the task, a lack of awareness of expectations, and their desire, in Currie's words "to stay out of trouble" (7). Nevertheless, the notion that second language writers' writing reflects practices and beliefs influenced by their native culture has found its way into the writing center literature, where it appears to be widely

accepted (Costello; Friedlander; Gadbow; Harris and Silva; Powers; Thonus, "Tutors"). Although it is evident that educational and cultural experience affect a writer's process and product, uncritical embrace of contrastive rhetoric in the writing center is problematic for several reasons. Most generally, contrastive rhetoric has been criticized as reductionist, that it unfairly constructs identities and practices for second language writers that may or may not apply (Cahill; Kubota; Leki, "Crosstalk;" Severino, "Doodles;" Spack, "Rhetorical"). It has been applied especially frequently to Asian writers. Cahill argues persuasively that much of the contrastive rhetoric literature, which characterizes Asian writing as indirect, non-linear, and lacking explicitness, as measured against the logical, linear west, is quite simply, orientalism. In fact, inexperienced writers can often be indirect, non-linear and implicit in their written expression as well. This does not mean, of course, that cultural differences do not exist, but simply that they may not always explain the features of the majority of second language writers' texts. It is important to examine such claims critically before using them to prepare tutors of second language writers.

## Learner language

Characterizations of learner language are necessarily generalizations, but even a cursory knowledge of second language learning processes and how they affect learner production can be helpful to writing center tutors (see Carson for a review). The texts produced by second language writers often diverge markedly from standard edited English; both second language writers and their tutors have to confront second language writers' linguistic errors. These may be of several types. First, there are many rules, such as subject-verb agreement, that most second language writers do know and can apply under the right circumstances. This is often the case with highly systematic rules that have a clear and predictable form-meaning relationship. Yet, second language writers may apply their knowledge unevenly because their attention is directed elsewhere during the writing process, namely, to the content of their texts. These are errors that second language writers can self-correct and they should be encouraged to do so (see Cogie, Strain and Lorinksas; Ferris; Williams and Evans). Other errors, ones that result from lack of knowledge or incomplete knowledge, are more difficult to assess. There are two issues to consider. First, although there is some controversy on this point, most applied linguists agree that linguistic knowledge may be acquired systematically or one item at a time.<sup>1</sup> This has implications for the kind of feedback tutors can give. An example of *system learning* is regular past tense marking with *ed*, or that the verb *wish* must be followed by a subjunc-

tive form of the verb (usually more simply explained as a past form) in the next clause. *Javier wishes he had a dog.* Because these structures can be described as part of a system, current knowledge can be projected onto new forms, e.g., *I wish I owned a Porsche.* Thus, feedback on one example might become useful in other contexts. Alternatively, learners can be encouraged to apply their own developing knowledge to new contexts. *Item learning* is, by definition, less efficient. For example, the fact that the word *iota* appears almost exclusively in negative sentences or the knowledge of which particle (e.g., *at, up, out, on,* etc.) should follow *work* in the sentence *I can't work out this problem,* is unlikely to extend much beyond these specific contexts. If second language writers do not have this knowledge, there is very little tutors can do other than simply tell them.

The second issue pertains to the type of knowledge source on which the second language writers can be expected to draw in order to improve linguistic accuracy. *Implicit knowledge* of a second language is much like knowledge of a native language: it is tacit and abstract. It is knowledge on which a user can draw without thinking in order to produce or understand language. Returning to the *wish* example above, most native speakers will accept *I wish I owned a Porsche* but reject *\*I wish I bought a Porsche.* This knowledge is part of a native speaker's linguistic competence, yet most of us would have difficulty explaining why the first sentence is acceptable but the second is not. Although the goal of second language learning is the development of this implicit knowledge, writers, because they have the luxury of time and planning opportunity, can also take advantage of their *explicit knowledge.* This is knowledge that they can articulate, but cannot always use when speaking or writing quickly or under pressure. Many second language writers can provide linguistic rules and reasons for why and how a certain form is used, often more readily than native speakers. Tutors should encourage writers to draw on both sources as they write and revise. They can consult implicit knowledge (*This doesn't sound right.*) or explicit knowledge (*Prepositions can only be followed by gerund complements*). Finally, it is clear that native speaking tutors have complete implicit knowledge of English. However, in order to assist second language writers in the development of their explicit knowledge, tutors would do well to make some of their own linguistic knowledge more explicit. In other words, they need to know English grammar rules in order to explain them to others (Ferris; Harris and Silva).

## The tutors

Tutors in the writing center, like teachers of writing, are often unprepared to deal with second language writers (Moser; Ronesi), in

spite of the fact that at some centers, the majority of sessions are with second language writers. What tutors are prepared to do is collaborate: "to guide, ask questions, listen and make suggestions, but they are neither authority figures nor evaluators" (Harris "Conflicts" 221). In short, they act as peer advisors. Studies of interaction among peers in second language writer classes have yielded mixed findings (see Liu and Hanson for a review). Some have found peer feedback to be as effective as teacher feedback (Hedgcock and Lefkowitz; Villamil and De Guerrero), others found that writers incorporated very little of what their peers suggested (Allaei and Connor; Connor and Asenavage), while still others found that writers were selective in what suggestions they chose to follow (Mendonça and Johnson; Nelson and Murphy). The uneven effectiveness of peer response may be rooted in the writers' perception that their classmates are, in fact, peers, and perhaps no more knowledgeable than they. Harris ("Collaboration") points to many important differences between peer collaboration and peer tutoring, including the roles, goals and methods. In fact, writing center tutors are not always the peers in practice that they are in theory (Dyehouse), especially when working with second language writers. Thonus ("Dominance") and Williams ("Institutional discourse") found consistent evidence for institutionally dependent markers of conversational dominance by tutors, in the form of turn length, directives, interruptions, and unmitigated suggestions. Thonus also found that second language writers wanted their tutors to behave as higher-status interlocutors, and that they found the tutors' dominant behavior to be consistent with their view of the tutors as authorities (Thonus, "NS-NNS Interaction;" Young). This view is echoed by the participants in the Harris study, who saw the writing center tutor as someone who could help solve problems ("Cultural Conflicts," 223).

## **Interaction**

If we acknowledge that writing center tutors and the second language writers who seek their assistance are perhaps not peers, that tutors demonstrate conversational dominance and that second language writers want and expect this, what implications does this have for tutoring second language writers? How does this perspective intersect with what is known about effectiveness of collaboration among peers in the second language writing classroom? Powers has suggested that it might well be appropriate for tutors to be somewhat more directive with second language writers than with native English writers. Yet, as Cogie, Strain and Lorinskas note, it is easy for such a policy to veer into tutor editing of second language writers' papers (7). How can tutors strike a balance between providing the guidance that second lan-



guage writers often seek and not providing so much that they are either editing or appropriating students' texts? The key, I believe, is in the interaction. Here, we may usefully draw on two related areas of second language acquisition research, both concerned with the interactions in which learners are engaged. The first is often referred to as the Interaction Hypothesis, which focuses on the role of negotiation of meaning in language acquisition, and the second, a sociocultural approach, much cited in other areas of education, which draws heavily on the work of Lev Vygotsky.

The Interaction Hypothesis refers to a body of research that addresses, among other things, the input-interaction-output sequence in second language acquisition. The discussion that follows draws primarily on the work of Michael Long, Teresa Pica, and Susan Gass. In particular, the Interaction Hypothesis explores how *negotiation* of meaning among learners and their interlocutors aids in the acquisition of language. Negotiation has a specific meaning in second language acquisition research. It is narrowly understood as taking place when there is some problem in communication, which results from a combination of limited linguistic resources of the learner(s) and the cognitive demands of the task. It can occur when interlocutors are unable to express themselves with sufficient clarity to be understood or are unable to comprehend what is addressed to them. Ideally, in order to resolve the situation, the interlocutors negotiate until mutual comprehension is reached. The following is a brief example of a negotiated sequence between a native speaker and a nonnative speaker. It revolves around the meaning of the word *facing*.

NS: Are they *facing* one another?

NNS: *Facing*?

NS: Um. Are the chairs at the opposite ends of the table or-

NNS: Yeah (Pica 515)

One of the first advantages attributed to negotiation is the increased comprehension of input, as in the example above. When learners participate in interaction, they are able to tailor the input to their own level of proficiency by signaling their interlocutors about language they do not understand. This is essential since comprehensible input is thought to be a prerequisite for acquisition. Second language writers are likely to have more access to such tailored input in a tutoring session than in a class since the input is addressed uniquely to them. Negotiation may facilitate second language acquisition in at least three other ways. First, it can call attention to aspects of what is called *positive evidence*, that is, information about what is possible in the target language. Since it is widely believed that only input that comes into

focal attention is likely to be acquired (Schmidt), this is a crucial function of negotiation. Learner participation in negotiated interaction can assist in the segmentation and analysis of input, and make specific, often problematic items in the input more noticeable. For instance, where problem areas emerge in negotiation, not just the meaning of the message but also its form may be brought into focus, pushing learners to pay more attention to those formal features. Second, negotiation can trigger the provision of precious *negative evidence*, or information about what is not possible in the target language, in the form of feedback from interlocutors. This process can help learners find out what they are doing wrong, either implicitly, when their interlocutors signal problems in comprehension, or more explicitly, through corrective feedback. Importantly, research suggests that learners are more likely to correct errors in their production when they are pushed to make their own contributions clearer (e.g., Lyster and Ranta; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morgenthaler). This opportunity for learners to shape their output toward comprehensibility and accuracy is a third advantage of negotiated interaction.

These findings may have important implications for second language writing, particularly in interactive settings such as the writing center conference. Thonus ("Tutors") has noted, during conferences, the presence of the interactional modifications thought to facilitate comprehension, such as confirmation requests (e.g., *Did you say the first one?*) and clarification requests (e.g., *Where did you want to put in that example?*), comprehension checks (e.g., *See what I mean?*), decomposition and segmentation (e.g., *The thesis statement, shall we start with that?*). These occur naturally during writing center sessions, but once tutors become aware of their importance, they can exploit them more effectively. In particular, they may be able to modify interaction in such a way that comprehension is enhanced. However, to be effective, it is essential that negotiation be two-sided, that not only the tutor, but also the writer engage in the interaction. Numerous second language acquisition studies have found that it is not simply the outcome of negotiation, that is, modified and presumably more comprehensible input, but the actual participation in the negotiation, that facilitates acquisition (see Long; Mackey, for reviews). Similar results can be found in second language writing research. Pathey-Chavez and Ferris found that active participants in student-teacher writing conferences made revisions that are more substantial in their drafts, and that they were able to appropriate and transform what was discussed in the session to create their own text. Weaker participants were inclined simply to transfer verbatim what the teacher said during the session into the revised draft. Conrad and Goldstein, in their study of writing conferences with second language writers, obtained similar results: that those students who participated in negotiation during conferences were more

likely to make meaningful revisions in their drafts. Here, negotiation is understood somewhat more broadly than in the second language acquisition literature, in that it does not necessarily involve communicative breakdown. It simply means that the interlocutors may begin with different understandings and, through negotiation, arrive at a mutual one.

Several studies of peer interaction in the second language writer classroom have shown results similar to those of Pathey-Chavez and Ferris and Conrad and Goldstein: negotiated points in student texts are more likely to be incorporated into final revisions. Villamil and De Guerrero found this to be the case for 74% of the trouble sources revised during peer sessions (501). Mendonça and Johnson found a lower (53%) but still substantial portion of peer-discussed revisions in final drafts (758). Suggestions that were not used were often explicitly rejected; in other words, the negotiation resulted in drafts that involved thoughtful and conscious choices regarding advice from their peers. In writing center research, a small-scale study has also shown the effectiveness of negotiation. In a comparative study of second language writer and native English writer sessions, Frank showed that the portions of student texts that were negotiated in the session were most likely to be revised in the final draft. This trend was consistent across second language writers and native English writers and focus of revision (i.e., whether it was a local problem, such as word choice or a more global issue, such as a major organizational revision). The lower proficiency speakers participated in the interaction with more difficulty, presumably because of their limited oral skills and tended to revise less. Interestingly though, Frank found that one lower proficiency student vigorously negotiated in the session, in spite of her modest language skills. That student's revisions were as substantial and effective as those of some of the native English writers who negotiated less. Frank concluded that second language writers could compensate for their lack of proficiency by actively negotiating meaning during sessions.

## **A sociocultural approach to second language writers**

The significance of negotiation of meaning is supported by research in second language acquisition in general and in second language writer and native English writer classrooms in particular. It has been shown to be helpful in the acquisition of both language and academic literacy skills. However, some in the field of second language acquisition have criticized this approach, claiming that it focuses too much on the individual and that it fails to take into account the very important role of social context. Sociocultural theory sees interaction as a social process that can result in the joint construction of new knowl-

edge (Vygotsky). Much of the work in this area is based on Vygotskian views of first language learning and education, in which learners first depend on *other-regulation*, that is, the guidance of more skilled individuals, to perform new and difficult tasks. Dialogue is a way for the novice to stretch current knowledge, as initial reliance on the expert yields to internalization of new knowledge by the novice and subsequent *self-regulation*. This is most likely to occur in the learner's *zone of proximal development*, the domain in which the learner is not yet capable of self-regulated activity, but can accomplish tasks under the guidance of experts or in collaboration with a peer. The zone of proximal development is not simply a predetermined next stage of readiness. Rather, it is mutually constructed and can only be determined dialogically, suggesting that knowledge creation is a socially mediated activity. The role of talk is particularly important here because concept and knowledge construction is mediated by language; articulation makes the new knowledge available for inspection and discussion. This is a precursor to the internalization of knowledge, which can then become automatic. Swain concludes that "verbalization mediates the internalization of external activity (109);" in other words, talking helps build linguistic competence. Thus, in writing centers, the dialogue may not only help learners to become better writers, but may facilitate language learning as well.

A growing body of second language acquisition classroom research, has investigated the possibility of novices, or peers, assisting one another through the zone of proximal development toward the construction and internalization of new knowledge (Aljaafreh and Lantolf; Pathey-Chavez and Ferris; Di Camilla and Antón; Donato; Ohta; Storch; Swain). Research on second language writers within a sociocultural framework demonstrates that novice second language writers, working collaboratively within their zone of proximal development, can move beyond their current level of competence by jointly constructing new knowledge in collaboration with peers (Storch; Villamil and De Guerrero). The zone of proximal development in these studies refers to their development of academic literacy rather than linguistic knowledge.

It is important to stress here the role that sociocultural theory gives to other experts in the development of new knowledge by novices. In the writing center, again, the question arises as to whether it is more useful to consider tutors who work with second language writers as peers, or as relative experts, who can provide other-regulation while the second language writers continue to build and internalize new knowledge. Cumming and So investigated the relative effectiveness on second language writing of procedural facilitation (Bereiter and Scardamalia) and error correction during tutoring sessions. Like Thonus ("Dominance"), Cumming and So found that the specific ap-

proach to tutoring had little effect on the participation levels of the second language writers, and that institutional roles overwhelmed any effect it might have had. This interaction is consistent with what Storch calls an expert-novice pattern, in which one interlocutor (the tutor) controls the flow of discourse, but there is moderate *mutuality*, that is, the expert actively encourages the participation of the novice. In prompting learners to adopt specific strategies, Cumming and So may have missed an important insight of sociocultural theory, that is, that effective feedback cannot be predetermined. The zone of proximal development emerges collaboratively and individually and is subject to constant change. Some learners may be almost ready for self-regulated activity, requiring only the most implicit guidance. Other learners may need far more—and more explicit—assistance and continued reliance on an expert for *scaffolding* of new knowledge. Scaffolding is the support provided by the expert that allows the learner to perform the new task. In the following excerpt of a writing center session, O, the tutor, scaffolds the writer's (L) language and task in several ways. He recasts her incorrect utterances with target language accuracy (2, 8, 14). He extends and elaborates her utterances (4, 6, 16). He takes the lead in the interaction and points to places in her text that may need revision (10, 12). In the transcription, each [.] represents .5 seconds.

1. L: This paragraph it's about . . . he discover his father experience.
2. O: mmhm . The discovery of his experience, right?
3. L: His father life . in the past.
4. O: He finds out the truth about his father's past?
5. L: The truth about Japanese.
6. O: About Japanese-Americans?
7. L: uh huh . . being. It's about his father life.
8. O: mmhm . His father's life.
9. L: . . um . . (writes) .The father's life.
10. O: mmhm . So what's next? . . So all of this is about that one sentence?
11. L: mmhm.
12. O: Kay. And this one is about?
13. L: Relationship between . father. Of his father and him - self.
14. O: About his father and his father's father?
15. L: uh huh. So, it's . . well . his father treated him like . his grandfather treated his father . . so it's like.relationship?
16. O: mmhm. Mokay. So, his father had a similar relationship with his own father?

(Williams, Transcript)

Thus, it is not a question of being more or less directive for second language writers as a group; rather, it is a matter of providing the level of directedness that is appropriate for each learner. Aljaafreh and Lantolf offer two important principles for experts to follow in providing guidance to novices, both of which read like a writing center primer:

Intervention should be *graduated* and *contingent*. It should begin at a highly strategic, or implicit level and progressively become more specific, more concrete, until the appropriate level is reached as determined by the novice's response. [...] Second [...] it should be offered only when it is needed and withdrawn as soon as the novice shows signs of self-control and ability to function independently (468).

If this is indeed the ideal learning situation for second language writers, there can be no better place for this to take place than a writing center, where dialogue is at the heart of every session.

Second language acquisition theory and research can provide a useful perspective for tutors in the writing center. Tutors who are aware of the processes involved in the development of second language and second language writing competence can be more effective in their conferences. In particular, knowledge of the role of input, interaction, output, and interlocutor scaffolding can guide their work with second language writers. The writing center can also be an important site for research into second language learning processes and the development of second language writing (Severino, "Cross-Language"). It is a unique place where talk and writing come together, where interaction nearly always focuses on meaningful communication, and writers work on authentic academic tasks. Indeed, the importance placed on the role of interaction in second language learning suggests that the writing center may sometimes be an even better place for second language writers to learn than the classroom.

## Note

1. This is a deliberate simplification and does not take into account connectionist views of second language learning (Ellis, 2002).

## Author's Acknowledgements

This paper has greatly benefited from suggestions made by Vainis

Alexsa, Patricia Harkin, David Shaafsma and several anonymous reviewers on earlier drafts.

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