The "ESL Best Practices Checklist" that is offered below was written by students in WR 421 Advanced Methods of Tutoring, Winter 2004. The students and I [Susan Whitelock] read many texts to advance our understanding of how best to tutor ESL/Multicultural Students (see Works Cited below). We also interviewed many EOU international students who gave us great insights into how best to meet their needs. Below is the "legacy" from the WR 421 students to help future writing tutors to more effectively work with ESL/Mulitcultural students. The document includes stories from tutors' personal experiences working with EOU international students.

This checklist will be a work-in-progress, so if writing tutors have ideas and stories they would like to add, their contributions will be welcome.

See also [*ESL research report*](#)

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ESL Best Practices Checklist

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Working with ESL students is a great opportunity to learn more about students from other cultures and about oneself as a tutor. However, tutoring students from another country can be intimidating, and there are certain factors to take into consideration before taking on such a task.

It is important to realize that there is no "better" or "best" method of writing when comparing one language and culture create what have been labeled "ESL problem areas." Many times, ESL students enter school systems in America with a mostly grammar-based understanding of the English language. They are taught from workbooks and memorization. This type of learning leaves students suffering from a lack of contextual understanding and idiom. Therefore, when working with ESL students, it is sometimes necessary to take a step back and assess the amount of knowledge the students have about how to write an American academic essay before addressing global and local areas.

Also, it is important to keep in mind that sessions with ESL students can take more time and effort, but ultimately, it is meaningful work, and working with such students creates well-rounded and experienced tutors.

1. Establish Rapport:

Ask student about ability and writing experience

Do not make assumptions about an ESL student's writing ability and experience based on a single writing sample. Instead, ask the student specific questions about his/her writing experience in both English and his/her native language. Students you are working with might have been professional writers in their native language, but you will not know this unless you ask. During this portion of the tutoring session, work to engage your ESL students with positive feedback and questions that show you are interested in helping them succeed.

Be considerate of student's needs

Each student has different expectations of tutors, and if you are unable to adapt to the students' needs, it is ok to recommend them to someone who may be better able to fulfill their needs.

Work to inspire confidence

Help students feel comfortable enough with you as their tutor and help them feel proud of working with you and improving their writing abilities. Compliment them with specific and sincere praise, and show them what their strengths are.

Find expectations and student's perception of the paper

ESL university students sometimes have a difficult time understanding their professors' expectations for assignments. As a tutor, it is your job to act as a sort of translator between professors and students. To accomplish this role effectively, you must ask students specific questions about their assignment while also looking at their written assignment prompt. Listen to their perceptions of the assignment, and compare them to your own. Through this dialogue, attempt to clear up any misconceptions that the student might have.

2. Identify Cultural Differences:

Learn about students' cultures, customs and traditions to connect with them

Try to learn about the culture of the student that you are tutoring. What country is s/he from? What is polite? What are some traditions? In doing so, you will begin to understand the world where they are coming from. Furthermore, this will enable a better, friendlier session.

Ask open-ended questions

When inquiring about a student's background, ask questions that will promote discussion and elaboration. This way you are not asking, "So you are from Japan?" and the student is not answering with "yes" or "no."

Respect student's need for privacy

Because of cultural differences, some students might be uncomfortable in tutoring sessions which are public, as are the sessions in the Learning Center/Writing Center. Be flexible with location. Move to a more private space if necessary. Also, negotiate reading aloud, perhaps taking turns or doing all of the reading aloud so the focus is not on speaking and pronunciation, but on the writing. Also, allow a student to use an alias on the board.

Make it up

For some cultures, it would be considered arrogant to talk about themselves, even in essays. Silence is often seen as power, and the students are very reserved. This creates a problem when they are asked to write about a personal experience. Instead, encourage students for whom this is the case to make experiences up. For a paper such as this, explain that they will not get in trouble

for making it up. Or ask them to describe a friend's experience and use it as their own, and they will feel more comfortable about writing the paper.

Do not assume about ability

Many students were established writers and professionals in their countries before coming to study in the states.

3. Assigning Roles:

Talk about their expectations of the tutoring process

It is advisable to find out just what the student wants out of a session with a tutor. For instance, if you find that a student is expecting you to correct grammar only, you can briefly explain what is wrong with the global aspect (while still advising on how to correct any global concerns) and spend more time on the local problems of their paper so that they may feel more comfortable. However, be sure to not get too distracted in only answering what the student wants. Be sure to discuss all concerns of the paper with the student, explaining clearly what needs work and exploring strategies for making the essay more effective.

Balance interaction between tutor and student

Establish a balance between informing and listening, so there is an equal amount of participation between tutor and student. Encourage students to take an active role in the tutoring session, but do not push too hard.

Challenge students to a high standard

Challenge all of your students, and hold them all to the same high standard. By doing this, it will help students develop the right attitude and they will approach their work in a more effective manner. Remember what we learned in WR 220, PRAISE is the first thing you should do after reading the draft.

Negotiate reading aloud

Do not demand that a student read his or her draft aloud, if it is clear that s/he is not comfortable doing so. Share the reading or read for the student, while s/he follows along actively. Use low voices so the student does not feel exposed. Adjust your style to the situation.

Explain collaborative process

Many times, ESL students are not used to the idea of a collaborative process. It may help to explain that you are not an editor. Instead, stress the fact that you are simply a peer who can give feedback on how to better the paper. It may be helpful to get a feel for the student's expectations of the session and make it clear that you will not correct every mistake, but will give guidance on how the student can correct his/her own mistakes. This is where you, as a tutor, let the student

know that you are "teaching how to fish instead of actually giving them fish," as Susan would say.

4. Identify Global Problems:

Avoid superficial feedback

The most common response from professors (and sometimes tutors) is that the student "needs improvement." What does this phrase imply? It is very vague and is of no help to the student. It also conveys that the student is inept, which brings up another problem you need to avoid with assuming.

Do Not Assume Anything! Just like we ask for more detail with students writing, you need to be more specific in your responses to students and watch body language to be sure you are getting through.

Have students summarize their paper with an outline

If you, as a tutor, wish to help the student with overall structure and thesis without working paragraph by paragraph, have the student write out an outline of his/her paper and then reflect on it. If the student can successfully create an outline that fits the criteria needed for the assignment, ask them why they chose that structure and congratulate them. Only after this should you work on local problems. If a student can't write an outline of his or her own paper, how are we, as peers (not tutors) supposed to be able to follow it clearly?

Do not assume authority over their text

The reading of texts is a social process. Our expectations and habits of reading are produced through social relations that the readings themselves reproduce. When tutors and teachers read, their interpretations and experiences of the text are determined by the social stance they take toward the student. In the role of teacher, they may assume authority over an ESL student and the text; by doing this, it allows teachers/tutors to appropriate the text, assume they know what it means or doesn't mean, and what its language should be. Tutors and teachers try to make the student's paper fit their own template of good writing, and sometimes approach the papers by not looking for what is already there, but rather looking for things that aren't there (creating their own meaning).

If needed, transcribe notes onto paper

If a student can easily describe everything they want to say in a paper
orally, but their paper itself is disjointed, confusing or vague, as a tutor you can take notes and write down what they say when they describe the paper and then help the student transform those ideas into the written paper.

Discuss expectations of academic essay and professor

This is a good opportunity for a tutor to ask a student how much s/he knows about the English academic essay. You can also tell students what you know about the professor and the class s/he is taking. This helps them feel comfortable with you and gives them a heads-up.

5. Identify Local Problems:

Become an informant when necessary

Some students make mistakes because they don't know the information. If a student struggles with an idiom or an exception to a rule, it's okay to become the informant and give the student the information they need to succeed with writing the paper.

Establish a plan for attending to errors

When it is time to attend to sentence-level error patterns, plan with the student how you will attend to the error. You may decide to, as you or the student reads, to mark an "x" in the general vicinity of the error, and have the student identify the error and correct it. You may decide to slow down at a word or phrase, or repeat a word or phrase to draw attention to a problem. Note that this technique works only when you are working on rule-bound errors. If the problem is with an idiom for which there is no rule, a tutor can point or repeat it until the cows come home, as the student will not have the information to fix the problem on their own. Here is where a tutor becomes and informant.

Do not correct all errors, but use examples

Remember we are not editors and you would be doing the student a disservice to correct all their errors for them. Not to mention that the errors may be so abundant it could be overwhelming for you to correct them. Instead, find the most common error in a specific draft and show them how to correct one or two examples. Then have the student practice correcting some of the errors. It is also encouraging for the student if you find a sentence where they used the proper form in their draft; then encourage them to create more sentences like that.

Be sensitive to errors and feelings of students

Though ESL students sometimes have many local errors within their papers, it is important that you do not identify these problem areas in a manner that could discourage students. Instead, you should emphasize the positive aspects of students'papers, then remind students of certain errors in the text. If an error pattern, such as article usage, is reoccurring, you can even approach the problem humorously. Remember that tutoring sessions have to be helpful, but they don't have to be serious.

Do not assume authority!

Tutors and teachers should attempt to negotiate a meaning from the text, and enter a dialogue with the students about the text. When we alter our relationships to our students, and work as

peer writers rather than authorites, we will also read their prose in a more egalitarian and helpful way.

6. Prepare For Next Session:

Encourage students to talk with professors during their office hours

Explain that it's not only struggling students that seek their help, but also "A" students often seek assistance from their professors. Here at Eastern, it is a more casual atmosphere, so students should feel comfortable with approaching professors.

Be willing to go beyond the session to answer questions

In some situations, one tutoring session may not be enough. If another half- hour is needed, be willing to attend to the student's needs. Sometimes it is helpful to go with a student to see a professor, as four ears are better than two. Also, be available to show them how to seek answers to their questions if you are not able to answer them.

Establish location (possibly outside Center)

Feel free to leave the Learning Center/Writing Center. Some international students are embarrassed in by coming in to see a tutor, so establish a place to meet outside of the Learning Center/Writing Center. Perhaps you could go to the library or the tables down stairs in Loso Lobby.

Encourage students to make another appointment

Explain to students that the only way their writing will get better is if they keep practicing and keep getting additional help from tutors. Ask them when they would like to meet next, or maybe even more than once a week. Even if the student does not plan on needing a weekly meeting, it is helpful for them because tutors can help with brainstorming, outlines, and general assignments. Explain that tutors can help at all stages of the writing process.

Shop for tutors

Encourage students to seek help from different tutors, as we all have strengths in different areas. Let students know they don't have to feel tied down to one tutor if they can find another tutor who is more suited to their needs.

Make a better writer, not a better paper

This is an extension of Susan's "don't give them fish, teach them how to fish" philosophy and what Stephen North reminds us is important to do: Make a better writer, not just a better paper.. We, as tutors, are not here to only make a better paper, no matter how much easier that seems. We must take into consideration that not all students are up for tutoring, and if we use our time wisely, we can feel a little bit better knowing that a student is writing his/her own paper without

a peer, if we try our best to make a better writer and not just a better paper. It seems hard, but, in fact, it's quite easy. Just do what we do best: tutor. And remember that it is the student we are tutoring, not the student's paper. Provide them strategies and tools that they can use in future writing.

End on a positive note

The most important part of a tutoring session is the ending. Make it a positive enough experience to make students want to come back again. Remind students of their progress, whether in terms of a particular draft, class, or term. Be sure to say something encouraging to them before they leave the session, and make it clear that you believe their next draft will be better.

ESLTutoring Experiences

Luke's Story

Establishing Rapport, Being Flexible, and Considering Student's Needs:

Establishing rapport with students is one of the most important, yet difficult jobs of a tutor. After working with many ESL students, I have witnessed the power of good rapport firsthand. While working with one particular student, a Japanese woman majoring in Sociology/Spanish, I was able to form an extremely productive and enjoyable tutor/ student relationship because I worked to establish rapport during our sessions. Though this student was initially very quiet, and only wanted her tutors to act as editors, I insisted on her participation in the collaborative process. This student was frustrated with other tutors because they had over emphasized global errors, neglecting any local corrections. When she got back graded papers, with each local error marked, she felt that both her tutor and herself had failed.

I quickly realized this problem, and sought to create a different tutoring session atmosphere for this student. Rather than diving right into the paper like the student wanted me to, I would make a point to talk to the student about her classes and her life before I would begin going through the paper. However, because the student had very advanced language skills, I felt that it was appropriate to identify local errors and focus on these rather than going through the standard global to local process that I use with other students.

Because of my flexibility and willingness to listen to her complaints, our time together became valuable to her. As we worked together more, we became friends. By simply being open to this students' concerns and expectations, I was able to establish a level of rapport that helped this student to feel comfortable enough to ask me specific questions about a class that we were both taking. Eventually, this student started sitting by me during class, and we became study partners. This relationship based on my initial commitment to establishing rapport, has become one that I am proud of as both a person and a tutor.

Identifying Cultural Differences:

Amber's Story

When working with an Asian student for the first time, I immediately asked the student, who shall remain nameless, "What country are you from?" The student informed me that she came from Tokyo, Japan. This information was locked away and I continued by asking, "How are you adjusting to the school system here?" To this she replied "fine." This fine was accompanied by a weak smile, which told me that things could be going better for her, but she wasn't going to tell me that.

To get more out of her took more time and more questions, but eventually she told me that she was not used to speaking to teachers so openly because this was not done in her culture. So it was necessary for me to explain that we, as student and tutor, were on the same level and she could speak freely. Sessions with this student greatly improved because she was not afraid to communicate her problems to me.

Generally when I ask open-ended questions to get students really thinking about their topic or to extract personal information from them. For example, one student from Mexico was experiencing difficulty writing exactly what he wanted to say about a political issue. When I came to a particularly confusing section in his paper I asked him, "What exactly did you mean to say here?" I did not offer my opinion about what he meant, but let him speak while I took notes. After reading what he had said it was easier for him for formulate sentences that made his points more clear.

Susan's Story

It is also important to realize that what is considered "good writing" in American academic culture may be different from what is considered "good writing" in other cultures. As you work with students, be curious about their writing histories and the ideas of writing in other cultures. I worked with a student from India who wrote long, informational papers but she kept getting low grades in her classes. I asked her what would be considered a good essay in her culture, and she said that the purpose of an essay in India schools is to show knowledge. I then explained that American college academic essays are expected to be thesis-driven and focused on a main idea. A light bulb went on over her head. No one had ever explained this to her. She was able to adapt her style to meet the expectations of American professors in academic culture. At no time did I imply that the thesis-driven essay is better, just different.

Another time I was working with a Japanese student who was writing an essay in response to an argumentative essay assignment. As we read through her draft, it was clear that she was talking around her position, never quite stating it. I explained to her that in American academic essays, students were expected to state their position outright. As we spoke, it was clear that she was following her culture's rules of politeness. According to this student, it would be rude and insulting to readers to push a position on them, or to assume the readers could not deduce the writer's position from the polite and indirect essay she had written. We ended up laughing about American's love of directness and bluntness in contrast to her culture's valuing of indirection and politeness. I was able to explain, then, the expectations of American college academic essays as different but not better than how essays are conceived in her culture.

Making Assumptions about ESL Writers:

Dave M's Story

Not all ESL writers need a lot of help with their writing. I once tutored a student from Burma, and when he came to see me, it was his first tutor session in the States. He was very nervous at first, so it would have been easy to assume that he didn't have strong English language skills. But after talking with him for a few minutes, asking open-ended questions, he relaxed and opened up a bit. In the long run, he was very talkative. I asked him what his expectations were for tutors and his answer was interesting. He seemed to know his English well and had only minor problems with idioms, but his main concern was trying to decipher the assignment given to him by the professors.

Getting him to collaborate wasn't a problem as he was more than willing to tell me his thoughts or to answer any questions I had for him. I used his willingness to talk in order to help him work through his own confusions. He was very willing to read his paper aloud, but when he had parts that confused him, he would ask me to read to help find the problem. After finding the problem, I would ask him what he thought sounded wrong. He was usually able to tell me what was wrong with it, and he would write down what he really meant. Ultimately, I feel like the job of the tutor is to have tutors help the students help themselves. Students that are diligent such as this Burmese student made tutoring not only a pleasure, but made it easy.

Identifying Global Problems:

Dave N's Story

At one point in time, most, if not all tutors, will experience something like this:

While working with one student's paper (after rapport and such jazz as that), I found it quite obvious that the paper wasn't focusing on the topic. However, it was quite easy to go through the paper without concern for the local issues and to conclude that there were no problems. After asking about the assignment and then analyzing paragraph-by-paragraph, it was evident that the writer was more than off track. This just goes to show that no matter how well an ESL student can write, the problem many times lies within the structure and overall flow of the paper instead of the articles and identifiers. So, as a warning, be sure to check out the assignment. Sometimes ESL writers misinterpret the assignment and needs help unpacking the language of an assignment.

Identifying Local Problems:

Jennifer's Story

In most cases, sentence level problems should only be discussed after all global issues have been taken care of; however, sometimes a single word choice error can be a global issue and should come up earlier. Take for example the English phrase "Last night I ate rice instead of bread." A Korean student might write that in one of two ways, depending on their familiarity with English:

1) "Yesterday evening in rice instead bread of ate" or 2)"Yesterday I ate the rice instead of the bread." The first sentence is confusing to the reader and could change the content of what the student says while the second only involves use of the word "the" and is a local issue that does not directly change the meaning of the sentence.

If the student expresses a need for grammatical correctness when you discuss their expectations, you can always spend the last part of the session to identify and model correcting some recurring sentence-level errors throughout the piece. This makes the student feel like they have accomplished something and gives them a defined direction to work on until the next session. However, sometimes tutors need to go from local to global with ESL students to gain students' trust, and then tutors can attend to global concerns.

Preparing For Next Session, Being Creative, and Making Sure Nothing Has Been Lost In Translation:

Danielle's Story

To encourage an ESL student I had only just worked with to make another appointment, I asked the student. "Would you like to come at this same time next week to go over another draft or assignment?" The student said "No." I was perplexed because the session had gone well and so, not wanting to dictate the student's answer by offering a reason why I thought she said this, I simply asked "Why is that?" She replied that the time did not work for her. I had hoped this was the case and not that my tutoring had not been helpful, so I created a new time slot when I could meet with her weekly.

Also, I was working with this one international student about two days a week who needed a lot of help with her English. Although she did not have enough new assignments each meeting, we worked very diligently on each paper. When we were not working on a paper for class, I would have her write narrative or descriptive writing for fifteen minutes, and then we would go over mistakes. I would also give her error patterns to look for in her own writing, or in fellow students' and friends' writing. This helped her to start thinking about her errors in other contexts, not just for class. At the end of each session, we would discuss how the class was going and whether or not she had talked with the professor that week. I would always praise her for a job well done and then we would end with me attempting to learn some form of salutation in French. This was a good way for her to feel connected to me, and allowed her to teach me, instead of me always teaching her. There are many creative ways of ending and preparing for the next session. Be creative and have fun.

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