

SUPPORTING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: CONVERSATION PARTNERS IN THE WRITING CENTER

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Introduction

Su is an international student who has been in the U.S. for less than three weeks, and she's visiting the writing center for the first time. She's enrolled in a seminar on Race and Theater and feels overwhelmed by the first assignment, which requires her to see a play and then write a paper in which she identifies its themes. Over the course of the session, it becomes clear to the tutor that Su's struggles in the class go well beyond the writing assignment. When she attended a performance of the play, she misheard much of the dialogue, and she was confused by its many pop culture references. When the play was discussed in class, the conversations about these references went quickly, and neither the instructor nor the other students seemed to recognize that Su wasn't following the discussion. Su also did not ask questions in class. She was afraid that her accent would make her hard to understand, and she was reluctant to reveal all that she did not know, especially her inability to anticipate what kinds of knowledge were expected from students in the class.

The services in the writing center are designed to help Su tackle *one piece* of what she needs to succeed in the class—namely, the writing assignment. But what Su really needs is support that more broadly addresses intercultural communication. That is, she needs support that blends oral language learning with written language development. Speaking, listening, reading and writing all play a role in the class that Su is taking, and she will need support on all of them to help her participate in that milieu. More importantly, she needs support that foregrounds one of the most difficult challenges of intercultural communication: namely, developing cultural awareness, which can be defined as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to both understand and interact across various cultures (Baker 65). In this case, cultural awareness includes the allegory, metaphors, and stereotypes often referenced in American literature and media, which would allow Su to move fluidly among academic, professional, and social discourses. Such cultural knowledge emphasizes language development beyond grammar to include non-standard English, colloquialisms, idiomatic

expressions, and jargon that is often overlooked or not taught in EFL classes in the student's home country (Gan et. al. 234-235).

Can writing centers provide the kind of support that students like Su really need? In the absence of other language support services, Su may view the writing center as her only recourse for both writing *and* language development. If Su gets this kind of support at the writing center, she will be able to weave her language and writing development into a symbiotic process, rather than isolating her writing needs from her gaps in language and cultural knowledge. Although the incorporation of language support into a writing center may seem daunting, the larger question is not just *if* there is a need for such a service, but *how* it will be implemented in terms of adjusting staff and tutor roles, the writing center's identity and mission, and the overlap of teaching, conversing, and guiding students.

In this paper, I offer a description of a program that, when added to the services that writing centers already offer, can significantly enhance their ability to support English language learners. The program I describe is called "Conversation Partners" at my institution, and it is a service that provides direct support for listening and speaking, as well as a platform for developing cultural knowledge. Conversation Partners programs housed in university writing centers could provide outlets for second-language writers to receive explicit English instruction, but more importantly, they could provide cultural awareness that will enable students to fully participate in American academic discourse communities. A robust Conversation Partners program could change a writing center from the ground up. By addressing intercultural communication directly, a Conversation Partners program explicitly expands the emphasis of the writing center—it's not just about writing anymore.

Theoretical Frameworks

The rationale for starting a Conversation Partners program is supported by several ideas that have emerged from research and scholarship in TESOL, intercultural communication, and applied linguistics.

First, it draws on the idea of discourse communities as hybrid and enculturating. When international students come to study in U.S. universities, they are not simply faced with the task of learning the vocabulary and grammar of a new language, but also of entering new academic discourse communities. These discourse communities may be based in a specific time or place or related to a specific group of people (Canagarajah 31). In order for non-native English speakers (NNES) to access these communities, they must learn the lexicon, cultural conventions, and expectations necessary to be viewed as members. NNES students come to American universities as members in other discourse communities from their home country, and they do not simply abandon those connections. Rather, they must find ways to maintain those memberships while simultaneously enculturing into American academic discourse. This process is commonly described as “negotiating” among discourse communities (Canagarajah; Hyland; Morita; Norton)—that is, seeking commonalities between and among multiple communities and building bridges and understandings between discourse communities to accommodate areas where they conflict (or seem to conflict).

One common example that illustrates how difficult this negotiation can become is the conceptualization of intellectual property. In the academic discourse community of a student’s native country, freely borrowing the work of others might be the sign of a skillful writer; this seamless interweaving of borrowed and original ideas often clashes with U.S. academic discourse, in which acknowledging the work of others is paramount to ethical research. In this instance, students must decide if plagiarism is a viable or unethical practice (Drank & Krolls qtd. in Sutherland-Smith), and if their academic citations represent honesty or dishonesty. Students must negotiate their perceptions of themselves as honest *people* with their identities as honest *students* who cite correctly (Valentine 90).

The negotiation of identity is at the heart of the process of enculturating into a discourse community. NNES students bring with them ideas from their home discourse communities about what it means to be a learner, a writer, and a communicator, and these ideas have shaped how they understand their own identity. When they encounter the different understandings of writers, learners, and communicators that infuse the American academic discourse community, they cannot acquire those understandings without also changing their own identities. Returning to the example of intellectual property, students adhering to the notion of

intellectual property as publicly shared might need to distance themselves from writing as a collective exercise and instead redefine themselves as individual writers with protected ideas.

Research in TESOL suggests that negotiating individual identity in relation to social identity (such as that found in a discourse community) works best when students have multiple opportunities to bridge oral and written contexts, or as Peirce states, “develop their oral and literacy skills by collapsing the boundaries between their classrooms and their communities” (26). Conversation Partners programs are effective for international students because they act as intermediary learning spaces between the rehearsed language practice of classroom learning and the impromptu nature of everyday conversation. Although students are in a learning space, they are also practicing one-on-one dialogue on topics of their choosing. The more modes in which language is practiced, the more discourse communities that a student can access and build upon.

But the other key component in supporting language learners—and the area where Conversation Partners programs have the most to offer—is access to cultural informants. Cultural informants are members of a discourse community who are willing and able to provide explicit information about that community to those who are non-members. International students who enter native English-speaking communities for the first time commonly have questions about using forms of salutation, appropriate physical gestures, how to gain the floor in classroom discussions, and how to politely address misunderstandings. In those cases, and many more, they are best able to learn and enculturate into the expectations of American universities when they can ask questions and get explicit answers from informants (Belhiah; Kurhila; Koshik; Seo & Koshik). Cultural informants serve as liaisons between students’ established identities and their developing ones by engaging in discussion with students not only about what American expectations are, but how they differ from the students’ home cultures. In addition to negotiating new identities, cultural informants can also serve to negotiate meaning in NNES’s language learning and storytelling. Research shows that the negotiation of meaning through collective scaffolding can help English language learners to develop more precise details, arguments, and cultural contexts in their retelling of stories (Ko et. al.). Although the majority of scaffolding and negotiation of meaning research has focused on English language classrooms, these strategies are also present in one-on-one interaction.

What is a Conversation Partners Program?

At their most basic level, Conversation Partners programs aim to provide listening and speaking practice to international students. They are offered at many universities, and they are usually designed as peer-learning programs: American students serve as conversation partners for international students who are NNES. However, many Conversation Partners programs are *not* specifically designed for matriculated university students. Rather, they are more commonly connected with auxiliary intensive English language programs intended for language learners who have not yet developed enough language proficiency to enroll in regular university courses. Although matriculated international students often receive specialized writing instruction in first year writing programs, they usually lack a space for listening and speaking development and feedback that specifically addresses second language learning. Prior to the development of our Conversation Partners program, matriculated international students at our institution could not access one-on-one second language support through the university.

Conversation Partners sessions at our institution provide a space for this type of support and typically include a blend of informal conversation and one-on-one language instruction. For example, a session might move from discussing a problem with a roommate into politeness strategies to use when confronting the roommate. From there, the conversation could progress into an explicit lesson on phrasal verbs related to the roommate problem, such as “keep it down” or “work it out.” It is not uncommon for conversations to move back and forth between social and academic contexts, such as from the roommate problem to discussing an issue with a professor or classmate. Conversation Partners can also help students interpret assignments, summarize and understand vocabulary from course readings, and discuss, brainstorm, and synthesize content that might be incorporated into a writing assignment or a project.

A hallmark of the Conversation Partners program at our writing center is that it is student-centered, and it provides opportunities for explicit learning about intercultural communication. The sessions are generally driven by questions that the NNES students bring, which often address intercultural communication issues such as politeness strategies used with professors and classmates or saving face in unfamiliar social situations. Students at our center often come to Conversation Partners to learn more slang and better understand ungrammatical forms of

English that they hear in colloquial contexts. The reasons that NNES students use Conversation Partners are widely varied, but can all be traced back to the students’ desire to use conversation sessions as a testing ground for membership in new discourse communities, whether those communities are specific classrooms, friendships, research cohorts, or the general public. Many international students exercise agency in their own language learning and participation in new discourse communities by incorporating their favored learning strategies into these new communities (see Morita), and in many cases, students who participate in Conversation Partners are also aiming to increase their participation in classroom discourse.

Integrating Conversation Partner Programs in a Writing Center

At one level, a Conversation Partners program is easy to integrate into a writing center. Conversation Partners programs are similar to writing tutoring programs in structure and format, and they are inherently peer-based, with the primary focus being the issues that students bring to the session. Conversation Partners programs also conform well to the space and administrative structure of many writing centers’ appointment and record-keeping systems. At our center, Conversation Partners and tutoring staff share the same writing center space, social media accounts, signage, and appointment scheduling protocol—namely, drop-in or appointment sessions. They also participate in the same Conversation Partner staff development programs, which focus on student-centered practice and scaffolded language activities. At our institution, Conversation Partners are current students who are hired based on previous study abroad, teaching, and language learning experience; in some cases, our staff are international students themselves, or tutors who have overlapping qualifications.

Joint tutoring and Conversation Partner staff might make sense for many writing centers, since some research suggests that writing centers already provide a “conversation partners-like” service, even if they are not doing so intentionally (Powers; Thonus; Valentine). Such service often appears in the form of scaffolding techniques such as repeating or rephrasing questions, summarizing, or reaffirming students’ speech (Weissberg 259), or through peer coaching that combines spoken and written skills into one session (see Valentine). As was the case with Su, the student I described at the beginning of this article, students come to the writing center for support on a writing

assignment, and they morph their session toward other concerns related to culture and discourse community expectations. The feedback they need cannot be categorized neatly into “grammar” or “content,” but it instead encompasses a wide range of lexical needs (Nakamura). Research on tutoring sessions with ESL writers shows that NNES students often depend on tutors to inform their understanding of academic expectations, how to interact with professors, and how to write for an American audience (Blau, Hall, & Sparks; Powers). Powers notes that “our faculty found themselves increasingly in the role of informant rather than collaborator” (41), which indicates that this role cannot fall just on tutors, but must be shared by all writing center staff, and may call for new positions (such as Conversation Partners) to be created.

Despite research that shows the preexistence of conversation-like support developing at the writing center, some writing centers may not welcome it when students engage tutors on issues that are outside the scope of their writing assignments. Supporting students on their oral language development and on their development of cultural knowledge can seem quite distant from supporting them on “writing.” In fact, in some cases, the time spent answering international students’ questions about American academic or popular culture was perceived as problematic, especially if the questions caused the focus of the tutoring sessions to shift away from the student’s assignment, or if they put the tutor in a role that was more directive than some centers prefer. Powers notes a tendency “...to define conferences where ESL readers got what they needed from us (i.e. direct help) as failures rather than successes” (42).

These concerns make sense, but if we want to help students develop as writers, we will be more effective if we place more substantial emphasis on intercultural communication. For NNES, learning isn’t neatly bordered by writing assignments. It’s an ongoing process involving multiple language modes, and it involves reevaluating their understanding of themselves as learners, as well as rethinking the role of writing center staff as not only collaborators, but language educators.

Embracing a focus on intercultural communication can have great benefits for writing center tutors and administrators, even beyond what it provides for NNES. Conversation Partners provides a perfect learning space for writing center staff and students alike to grapple with the full complexity of what it means to be an international student and to enculturate into a new discourse community. Serving as a cultural informant helps staff to recognize and

think critically about the ways that discourse communities and identities develop, and it can help them study and conceptualize language in broader ways than they might have otherwise. Rafoth notes that “figuring out how English works is something you cannot just squeeze in between tutoring sessions,” but rather it is an endeavor that tutors must constantly be exploring independently (Bruce & Rafoth 214), and a Conversation Partners program can serve as the designated space for such exploration.

Finally, serving as cultural informants for international students can also lead to greater reciprocal exchange in which international students expand writing center tutors’ and administrators’ cultural knowledge in return. Due to the Conversation Partner program’s emphasis on conversations about cross-culturalism, students and Conversation Partners have more opportunities to collaborate on something that they each have in-depth knowledge about—their own cultural expertise and expectations. The reciprocity of knowledge among staff and students creates a more equal distribution of power and dominance in the conversation, such as allowing both participants ample chances to gain the floor when speaking. Such conversational equity may also lead both speakers to feel more comfortable in conducting conversational repair, since cultural misunderstanding must be negotiated with each person acting as both an expert and novice across communities. At our center, this was especially true for international graduate students, who often knew the terminology necessary for their areas of specialization, but lacked the foundation in academic discourse to translate and structure these complex ideas in a way that American readers would understand. In one reported Conversation Partner session, a dance student was able to describe the artistry of her movements in metaphorical terms, but found it difficult to translate her understanding of dance into metaphors that were relatable for native English speakers. In other words, the student was an expert in the description of dance as metaphor, but a novice in wielding comprehensible English metaphors, whereas the inverse was true for the Conversation Partner.

Providing Integrated Support for Language Learners

Imagine if Su had entered a writing center with a Conversation Partners program in place. In that case, she might have started by working with a Conversation Partner with whom she could discuss and practice the many oral language components that accompanied her writing assignment. From there, she

could move fluidly between Conversation Partners and writing tutoring sessions and between learning the language and cultural knowledge necessary to join the particular discourse community of her theater class, as well as the discourse community used by writing center staff. Su may also better understand the conversation strategies used in tutor-tutee interactions by practicing conversational models typically used at the center. She could work with a Conversation Partner prior to a writing tutor session to discuss her interpretation of certain cultural topics, and how such topics might be received by her target audience. This would give her more opportunities to discuss all aspects of the assignment—from vocabulary comprehension and reading summarization to brainstorming and oral analysis. It would also give her more experience and practice with conversation models in academic settings. She might also come to Conversation Partners to unwind after a stressful revision process, or to seek encouragement on how to balance her workload with her continuing language development.

Su might also become a regular visitor to the center if she establishes a rapport with a Conversation Partner. She could feel a sense of importance by sharing her own knowledge of her home country's politics and pop culture while simultaneously receiving new information. In Conversation Partners, instead of her writing skills being under scrutiny, a mutual establishment of cultural understanding would take center stage. Bruce noted in interviews with ESL writers that many of them felt embarrassed when using writing center services and did not wish to publicly expose any weaknesses in their English writing skills (Bruce & Rafoth). International students such as Su may feel more comfortable consulting writing tutors after they've met with Conversation Partners, especially if the partner is also on the tutoring staff. Su would leave the center knowing that she was not only gaining access to new communities, but also establishing a social identity within the writing center as someone who both gives and receives valuable information.

Implications for Future Research

Conversation Partners programs are still a relatively new phenomenon with long-term implications for writing center pedagogy. Future research will need to address program assessment and the role that Conversation Partners plays in changing staff dynamics. The coexistence of these two programs poses the risk of tutoring and teaching becoming synonymous for the same service; a close analysis of

how tutors and Conversation Partners define their roles will help writing center staff better understand how to structure each program's identity in relation to the center as a whole. The hiring and training process for tutors and Conversation Partners also deserves more attention. A combination of both crossover and specialized student staff has been effective at our center, but more crossover training will be needed in order for the staff to seamlessly act as tutors, language teachers, and cultural informants. However, much of what the Conversation Partners do in a typical session is not structured, so a greater understanding of links between free chatting and teaching will need to be established.

A look at the NNES students who use both services is also a crucial component of future research into Conversation Partners programs. Certainly, tutors and tutees will develop new notions about what a writing center can and cannot do, and NNES students in particular have expressed that they feel more at home in the writing center with the knowledge that the center values and creates a space for explicit language practice. Conversation Partners can redefine a writing center as much more than an academic support service, but also as a place for language socialization.

Conversation Partners should not be viewed as an accessory to a writing center, but as a valuable player in uniting TESOL and writing center pedagogy. By creating a special space for NNES students within the writing center, we can begin to publicly demonstrate that we value students coming from other discourse communities and hope to inform them, as well as ourselves, about the differences present in students' oral and written discourse communities.

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