

AN ONGOING ESL TRAINING PROGRAM IN THE WRITING CENTER

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Currently, nearly 130,000 Chinese students are studying at higher education institutions in America (Xueqin par. 1). In a case study of 13 student visits to the Rutgers University Writing Center, Renee Pistone observes that the five ESL students in this group “indicated a high level of frustration (by a perceived lack of caring on the part of their Professors) who made comments on their assignments” (10). The students visiting Pistone’s center were looking for more than just help with their papers; they were looking for reassurance, kindness, and a clearer understanding of their professors’ expectations (10). While Pistone’s study does not deal specifically with Chinese ESL students, her observations reflect the kinds of interactions consultants in the writing center at my small Midwestern liberal arts college have encountered with the Chinese students that rely on us for writing assistance since our school has not yet instituted any language-specific support after the ESL sequence—a choice entirely common in American higher education institutions. As a new writing center coordinator in the midst of a growing China-based International Program, I struggle to train my consultants to work with a population that, aside from the financial gain to the institutions they attend, is largely ignored in terms of support services and trained personnel that meet their specific linguistic and cultural needs.

Although the economic downturn has caused many academic departments and administrative offices to suffer significant cutbacks in their budgets, the failure of institutions to provide adequate academic support for Chinese students and staff training for employees who work with them undermines the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion that many institutions list as a core value. Chinese students are taught to respect professors and administrators; it seems unlikely that they would make demands for

additional support structures on their own behalf. However, in American culture, a predisposition not to speak up often results in the marginalization of that group and its concerns. Writing centers and writing center scholarship can play a key role in mitigating this marginalization by bringing cultural and linguistic issues to the forefront of research, training, and institutional dialogues on academic support.

Although language support for second-language learners (L2) is becoming a concern for writing centers that has grown exponentially over the past ten years, the scholarship has not kept pace. For example, in the 2001 edition of the *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*, only one of the 45 essays focuses solely on the issue of ESL instruction in the writing center—Judith K. Powers’s “Rethinking Writing Center Conferencing Strategies for the ESL Writer” (368-75). Powers describes the roadblocks her writing center encountered during conferences with ESL writers, issues she faces in adapting nondirective writing center pedagogy to an ESL context, and strategies to help writing centers refine their pedagogical approach during such sessions. However, no theorist in this comprehensive volume of scholarship mentions the phenomenon of writing centers becoming default ESL writing labs in the absence of other language or writing support services, nor do any of the authors address the issue of ESL conferencing in culturally or linguistically specific contexts. A number of *Chronicle* essays note the repercussions of growing international enrollment in the absence of adequate support services. Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth’s highly readable collection of essays, *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, addresses this need admirably. The essays cover topics such as helping second language learners clarify their ideas, working line-by-line on sentence structure, and overcoming cultural differences in communication

style. Despite its generalist treatment of ESL populations, this resource is a boon to staff, faculty, administrators, and all those assisting students with college-level writing who do not possess the requisite facility in linguistics or second-language writing pedagogy which are becoming increasingly necessary to help the modern higher education population. However, Rafoth is correct in his assertion that this issue requires more concentrated—and I would argue culturally and linguistically specific—scholarly attention, especially given the rise of online writing consultations and administrative support of outsourcing writing assistance on some campuses. Available scholarship on the Chinese student experience, either in or outside the contents of academic support, is limited and does not address issues of training consultants and faculty to respond to this population's writing.¹ For instance, on our campus, e-feedback is not popular among the Chinese ESL cohort. A study on the ways in which e-feedback does not meet ESL student needs would not only help support the case for writing center positions within a campus community, but also provide much-needed insight into the complexities of responding to writing in cyberspace.

The population of Chinese students at my small liberal arts college has grown from 20 to 120, resulting in a 40% jump in ESL writing consultations over the past 10 years. At the moment of this writing, Chinese ESL students make up an astounding 601 of the 811 sessions our center has conducted since the beginning of September last year. For the most part, the writing center has in effect become the ESL lab. This change in our client base brought about a campus-wide shift in how the center is perceived, leading us to question our identity and role on campus in several ways. First, if the college continues to admit international students at ever-increasing rates, what entities should be designated as providing language support for L2 speakers of English; should it be the same entity that currently serves students in our first-year writing and general education courses? Second, if our writing center is designated as the primary support for our ESL populations, can we also live up to our promise

to help all students at all phases of the writing process, which our center has pledged to do by making one-to-one and online support available for campus-wide writing and communications courses? While many complicated issues are involved in answering these questions, our staff has chosen to focus on a combination of training and collaborative partnership to create tailored consultations for the diverse learners that visit us each semester. Our partnerships with the first-year, developmental writing, and ESL programs have improved the ways our staff conducts sessions with these students by providing communication and targeted feedback strategies to help students from each population gain comfort with sharing their writing, improve their writing skills, and increase their confidence and autonomy as writers.

In addition to these partnerships, we have updated the center's consultant training program, adding an interactive online learning and support community to assist consultants with navigating the exponential growth in ESL demands. We have begun using Moodle, an open-source course management system, to deliver self-paced, ongoing training without additional coursework or expenditure. The program consists of two 10-week modules, the first of which introduces the fundamentals of writing center consultations and the second of which features seminal theoretical texts (e.g., Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center") and advanced instruction in assisting ESL writers. For the ESL component of the program, I rely heavily on Bruce and Rafoth's *ESL Writers* for general strategies and a partnership with the college's ESL department for linguistic and culturally specific tools for responding to Chinese students' writing. Bruce and Rafoth's essay collection, used in conjunction with the training materials and coursework provided by our college's linguist, has helped our staff grasp some of the roadblocks these second-language speakers tend to encounter when writing in English. Each week, consultants read one of the essays and post a response to the discussion board. They also respond to other consultant comments and share teaching aids or handouts for ESL consultations. Due to these new approaches, I have seen my

consultants go from isolated islands to a cohesive, excited, and engaged team interested in helping each other better assist the students that visit the center. For us, this represents the use of educational technology at its best.

In addition to these technological efforts, our center began an internal education initiative 18 months ago, which has been paying major dividends. As center coordinator, myself, and at least four consultants, began enrolling in TEFL courses each semester. This educational partnership with the ESL/Linguistics faculty has also been an important way for me, as a coordinator, to work with my consultants as a peer, and for my consultants to gain on-the-job experience working with Chinese L2 writers. Like most of the consultants at our center, I have a great deal of experience working with first-year and developmental writers, but lacked the tools to work effectively with any L2 speakers of English, let alone speakers of Chinese, a language that differs markedly from English. Without these tools I had difficulty helping my consultants feel at ease in sessions with L2 students. Personally, I felt I had nothing to offer them—a sense that left me frustrated and a little sad at the end of the day. However, taking TEFL courses alongside my staff members demonstrates to them that, as their supervisor, I am committed to refining my skills so I can more effectively support them and the students who visit the center.

As many faculty, consultants, and teachers of writing are likely aware, English presents a major obstacle to Chinese students' academic success, and the level of English Asian students enter college with varies widely. Although our center works as hard as we can to train our staff to work with Chinese ESL students, our training program is only a small step in working toward the inclusion of Chinese students on American campuses. The development of good language skills is crucial to helping these students communicate with American scholars in their fields, make American friends, and succeed in their studies. In the academic world, language skills are not “soft skills.” They are of critical importance both to the student and the institution; without an understanding

of how to express themselves in writing, students who come from different national origins cannot fully share their unique ideas or experiences, a situation which severely hinders the kind of dialogues that lead to the innovations within, and across, national borders we all desire.

Notes

¹ As far as I'm aware, the dissertations by Vallejo (2004) and Ritter (2002) are the only scholarly book-length studies devoted to the issue of tutoring ESL students in writing centers. Work on tutoring Chinese students, in particular, appears to be rather scarce. Carol Severino discusses Chinese students in the writing center in her article “The ‘Doodles’ in Context: Qualifying Claims about Contrastive Rhetoric.” Joel Bloch's study focuses on the intersections between plagiarism and technology among ESL students. Yurong Zhao's sociolinguistic analysis of ESL composing practices focuses on teaching English composition in China. However, none of these studies address the issue of writing consultant training in the context of Chinese L2 learners. Some excellent studies exist in the Linguistics and TESOL fields, but they are limited to teacher-student rather than writing consultant-student relationships.

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