

TUTOR TRAINING AND SERVICES FOR MULTILINGUAL GRADUATE WRITERS: A RECONSIDERATION

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Multilingual graduate writers make few appearances in writing center discussions. These students live, work, and write at the intersection of two subjectivities—graduate writer and multilingual writer—neither of which is the core population of native-English-speaking undergraduates with whom most writing centers have traditionally worked. Writers who are multilingual or “ESL”¹ have received frequent attention (e.g. Blau and Hall; Bruce and Rafoth, Myers; Harris and Silva), and a handful of scholars have considered the challenges of tutoring graduate students (e.g. Pemberton; Powers; Gillespie; Snively). However, the research tells us little about how to work effectively with students who are both multilingual and graduate writers (hereafter, MGWs). In this essay, I place interviews with MGWs in conversation with a survey of writing center practices with MGW student populations. Based on the experiences of the MGWs I interviewed, I suggest that writing centers could better meet MGWs’ needs by adopting a more holistic approach to the writing process that is more disciplinarily informed and that resists creating false dichotomies between global and sentence-level concerns. I argue that for MGWs, sentence-level problems—even those that tutors might judge to be minor or moderate—may have serious implications for their professional advancement.

I conducted a three-part study in order to better understand MGWs’ needs in the context of current writing center practice. The study began with interviews with seven of the most frequent MGW users at my writing center,² a large Midwestern university that provides approximately 4,000 sessions each year. These single interviews of 15-30 minutes each were contextualized with an analysis of their tutors’ reports. Concurrently, I also conducted one-year case studies with five other MGWs. The study

concluded with a survey of other writing centers’ practices with MGWs. I focus here on intersections between the interviews and the survey results, as the interview findings suggested that the unusual positioning of MGW participants generated a unique combination of needs. While readers’ experiences may suggest that some findings are also true of graduate students or multilingual writers more generally, such claims are beyond the scope of this study, since all participants in the study were both multilingual and graduate writers. However, I believe these are important avenues for future research.

I begin with Lan, Kurie, and Bunpot,³ three of our center’s most frequent clients. In interviews, they highlight needs for higher (and more discipline-specific) levels of tutor expertise and intensive sentence-level assistance to improve style and build vocabulary. Lan, a Taiwanese PhD candidate in Communications, had worked with tutors regularly for over a year when I asked if she had a preferred tutor. Her reply speaks to the importance of sentence-level tutoring—especially vocabulary and style building—in an MGW session:

Last year, I worked [with] Jared. He is very good. [A]fter he left, I cannot find the one [tutor] that really fits my need, so I just pick whoever. For me, my problem is not grammar and spelling mistakes. I need someone to proofread for basic grammar, but I don’t have a lot of mistakes. [...] But I hope someone can really polish my paper—polish my ideas. As a PhD student, if you want to publish, you must make it as professional as an American’s. Jared can polish my language. After he revised my paper, I would just feel very confident.

When asked what she had learned from tutoring, she said, “I will go back to read another paper and see if I

can *borrow some kind of language*” (emphasis added). Although Lan may sound as though she is looking for a drive-by editor, these comments instead revealed that she, like many other MGW writers I have encountered, actually sought style tutoring from the writing center in addition to some error correction. She was learning the more sophisticated vocabulary that Jared had taught during previous sessions and then applying it to new papers so that she would be able to publish her work and be more competitive on the job market.

Bunpot, a Thai PhD candidate in Communications, articulates a need for tutors with discipline-specific knowledge and experience with specialized genres. When asked if the tutors were qualified to help her, she replied:

Yes. I had a bad experience with some students here...there were some undergraduate students who didn't really understand research. They didn't know what they were reading. That caused a lot of problems.... I used to work with someone here and he's too young. He would just read it and have no idea. Lately, I've been working with Ira and with Erin.⁴ For Ira, his English is strong and I have been working with him for a few years. Erin is good because she knows a lot about my area of study, so sometimes when I need special things, like writing a grant proposal, I go for Erin instead of Ira because she knows the contents of the proposal.

Bunpot identifies a need for help with a grant proposal, one of the specialized genres of her profession, and then she notes, “for a PhD student, we are normally pretty strong in what we are doing.” Bunpot thus also challenges undergraduate tutor authority. She does not accept that an undergraduate can help her with anything more than sentence-level problems. Moreover, she feels that experience confirmed her belief that only those who shared her disciplinary background provided useful feedback.

Kurie, an International Studies master's candidate from Laos, also identified a lack of tutors in her discipline as problematic. She complained:

A lot of times I end up explaining what I'm talking about. The [tutor] keep telling me that is

not her field, it's not her field and she couldn't understand what I'm trying to say and I was very stressed and I was upset with her. [A]t the end I told her 'I just wasted my time with you'. Time is very important to me and when I come here and my time isn't used well [I'm very upset].

Though these quotes might suggest otherwise, none of these women were considered “problem users” by the center's staff. They were viewed as strong writers and dedicated students who used the writing center appropriately. And while each writer was reasonably satisfied with the center—each came once or twice a week—they also identified unmet needs. First, each writer preferred tutors with discipline-specific knowledge and who had also done graduate work themselves; and second, they also sought help with sentence-level composing and error correction, concerns that have often been a point of contention in writing center work with multilingual students (see Harris and Silva; Linville; Blau and Hall; Myers).

Though some undergraduates might share these needs, writing is the primary means of professional advancement for Lan, Kurie, and Bunpot. They had invested a great deal of time and emotional energy to begin mastering the knowledge and discourse of their fields. Unlike some undergraduates, these women were highly committed to their fields and needed to become full members of them quickly. As graduate writers they are also more likely to have adopted the identity of the field as their own; therefore identity is at stake for these writers as they make their way through their programs, not just success or failure. Because these graduate students are also multilingual, the ongoing development of their language abilities may mean that they are even further from achieving their professional goals and that it is precisely the remaining issues of language acquisition that will prevent them from attaining those goals.

While these may be brief snapshots, the views of these participants were also voiced by other interviewees and by many other MGWs I have tutored. These snapshots are also consistent with Judith Powers' 1995 critique that her undergraduate tutors struggled to help graduate writers because they

did not understand the writers' fields or texts. Powers writes, "more often than we liked to admit, we were unable to assist thesis and dissertation writers in substantive ways because we could not understand their material or their disciplines well enough" (13).

With the voices of Lan, Bunpot, and Kurie in mind, I conducted a survey through the WCenter listserv to understand the field's current practices toward MGWs. I received 51 responses from centers that tutored multilingual graduate students. The survey asked:

- about the tutor training that the writing center provided on multilingual issues and on graduate issues;
- about self-perceptions of the help that students sought from the writing center;
- about effectiveness in providing that help; and
- about areas of special effectiveness or ineffectiveness in work with MGWs and with native-English speaking graduate writers (hereafter, NGWs).

The findings suggested that many of these centers operated from an assumption that no specialized knowledge or skill was necessary to tutor MGWs effectively. Fifty-six percent of respondents did not provide any training for tutorials with graduate students. This finding suggests that more than half of the respondents may not recognize meaningful differences between graduate and undergraduate writing. This provides a stark contrast to the responses of my participants, who believed the complexity of their work and of their rhetorical situations was substantially different from that of most undergraduate writing projects.

The picture for multilingual tutoring training was slightly more encouraging. Sixty-four percent of respondents provided tutors with designated training on multilingual issues. These findings reveal a stronger recognition (which the broader field seems to share) that multilingual writers face unique challenges and that tutors need additional training to tutor them effectively. Yet it is surprising that this figure was not higher given the struggles surrounding many writing

centers' work with multilingual writers and the scholarly/academic attention given to those struggles. Almost one-third (32%) of respondents who tutor multilingual writers still did not provide training on multilingual issues.

Since many centers had not provided designated training, I was particularly interested in the problems writing centers had encountered while tutoring graduate students (both MGWs and NGWs). As part of the same survey, respondents were also asked about the areas in which they had been particularly ineffective. More than one-third of responding writing centers did not identify any areas of ineffectiveness. Among the problems that were identified, nearly half were perennial issues such as lack of institutional support and inappropriate faculty and student expectations (see Figure 1).

What I found most interesting were problems of unmet needs and "other," which accounted for 34% of centers' self-perceptions of ineffectiveness. There, we see clear connections between writing centers' perceptions of ineffectiveness with graduate writers and the needs my participants identified. Specifically, writing centers identified problems with:

- language development and editing support, especially for multilingual students (42%)
- "inexperienced consultants" and "undergraduates uncomfortable working on dissertations" (21%)
- major project support (e.g. dissertations) (14%)
- research methodology support (8%)
- difficulty in hiring tutors from important disciplines (8%)
- reading support (7%)

All of these problems except "reading support" were also identified by my participants. Writing centers identified problems with tutors' lack of experience in general and in negotiating sentence-level issues with multilingual writers. Further, they identified tutors' particular lack of disciplinary knowledge, an issue that even training and experience may not resolve. One respondent wrote, "the undergraduate consultants

occasionally feel unprepared to work with grad students and dissertations.” As a former dissertation tutor myself, I find it surprising that they only *occasionally* feel unprepared.

The survey also asked respondents about self-perceptions of effectiveness, distinguishing between NGWs and MGWs. The questions addressed tutoring in development, genre, style, citation, research, editing, discipline-specific issues, advisor issues, and general help. The respondents had a fairly high assessment of the help they provided to NGWs, rating themselves

4.02 out of 5 across all categories on average and rating themselves “effective” or higher in seven out of ten categories where 1 = very ineffective and 5 = very effective. They gave themselves the lowest scores on tutoring of various discipline-related issues, specifically “negotiating other demands from an authority,” “discipline-specific problems,” and “research methodology” (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Areas of Ineffectiveness with Graduate Writers

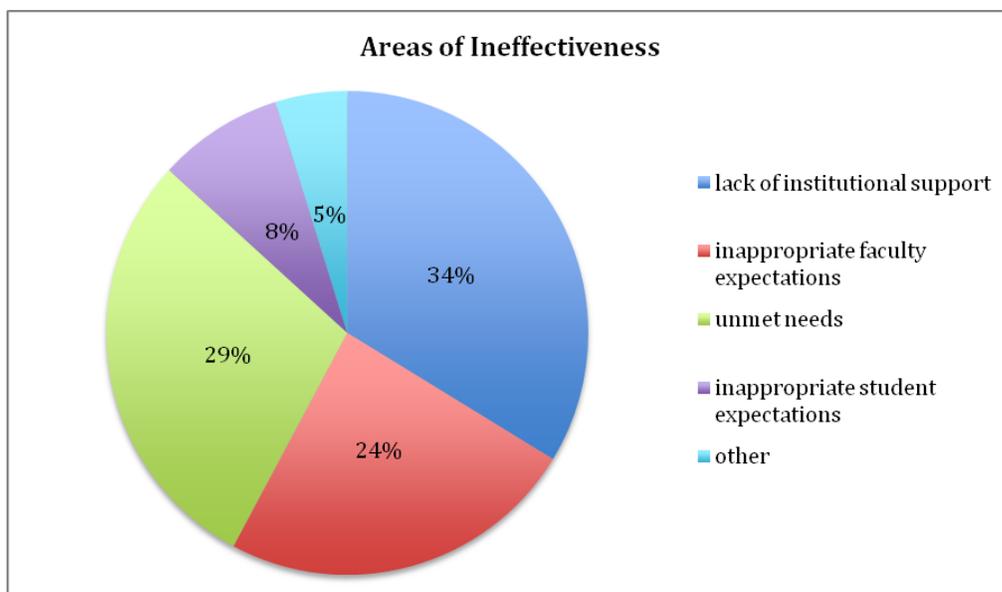


Figure 2: Perceptions of Effectiveness in NGW Tutoring

citation	4.57
general writing problems	4.41
genre	4.28
organization	4.16
editing/corrections	4.14
development	4.02
style	4.02
negotiating other demands from an authority	3.65
discipline-specific problems	3.61
research methodology	3.39

For MGWs, scores were lower, but centers still perceived themselves as very effective, giving themselves an average of 3.88 out of 5 across all categories. Again, discipline-related issues received the lowest scores, but in five out of ten categories, writing centers gave themselves scores of “effective” or higher; they never described their work as “ineffective” or “very ineffective.” They also did not identify problems with their sentence-level tutoring, even though this issue has a long history of being a problem area (see, for example, Bruce and Rafter; Blau and Hall; Myers) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Perceptions of Effectiveness in MGW Tutoring

citation	4.37
general writing problems	4.26
genre	4.09
organization	4.07
editing/corrections	4.02
style	3.88
development	3.77
negotiating other demands from an authority	3.63
discipline-specific problems	3.49
research methodology	3.23

The survey results imply that many respondents were satisfied with their work, as average scores for effectiveness in dealing with specific MGW challenges were quite high. Yet centers that did identify areas of ineffectiveness lend validity to the unmet needs that Lan, Bunpot, and Kurie voiced: needs for discipline-informed help, sentence-level help (style and correctness), and help with large writing projects.

My participants’ needs were also affirmed by centers’ responses to special areas of success. When asked to identify programs and ideas that had been especially effective, nearly every item corresponded to my participants’ stated needs for discipline-informed tutoring. These successes included:

- dissertation “Boot Camps” or tutoring;
- genre workshops (on literature reviews, grants, abstracts, prospectuses, etc.);
- citation workshops;

- graduate writing groups;
- discipline-specific dissertation workshops, tutors, and tutoring; and
- workshops on the GRE.

Other writing centers’ successes with graduate writers lend additional credibility to the needs that my participants identified. They also suggest possibilities for new or expanded services that are more disciplinarily focused.

Given these correspondences between MGWs’ needs, writing centers’ successes, and writing centers’ problems, how might writing centers work more productively with MGWs? What are the characteristics of a writing center designed to tutor MGWs effectively? The essential characteristic is *holistic*: this research suggests that writing centers must continue working to account for the unique characteristics and needs of student populations like MGWs. To do so, they need to explore ways of providing support for writers’ whole texts—from the first word to the complete paper in all of its disciplinary situatedness—and for the whole writing process, from research design to editing.

A holistic approach begins by recognizing the role of disciplinarity in MGWs’ texts. Some writers will certainly find generalist feedback useful at certain points in their writing processes, but a holistic approach must also include discipline-informed feedback to the writers who seek it. An explicit disciplinary approach is the guiding principle behind a recent pilot program that Paula Gillespie began, in which “two tutors now serve in their departments, working with their colleagues on writing in specialized genres for their disciplines” (2). Gillespie’s program reminds us that generalist feedback is valuable, but no panacea. For graduate writing, an insider’s perspective is often more valuable. Moreover, regardless of what we as practitioners think about the merits of generalist feedback, MGWs may have already determined that it is ineffective. Many MGWs whom I have encountered simply do not accept that undergraduates can provide adequate help. When centers downplay the value of discipline-informed tutoring or “disguise”

undergraduate tutors in some way, we risk damaging our ethos among MGWs.

A holistic approach also means giving consideration to research methodology, which is in essence an act of pre-writing for many graduate writing projects. While research methodology has traditionally been treated as outside the purview of writing center work, these findings encourage a reconsideration, particularly if institutions do not offer support elsewhere. Helen Snively offers a valuable example of a writing center that, recognizing the need, created a fully integrated graduate writing *and research* center. She recognized that many students who had been trained in research methodology still found undertaking a study on their own overwhelming. If the faculty advisor is unable or unwilling to provide a writer with in-depth support, then a tutor with a strong research background could offer valuable help. Writing centers could continue to take the same deferential stance towards faculty that most do now. For example, “You should talk to your advisor, but if I understand your project correctly, you may need to choose X instead of Y.” Research methodology may make us uncomfortable, but it is an inextricable part of much graduate writing.

My own institution has just opened a new Graduate Writing and Research center, inspired by the one Snively describes. We have been working to hire tutors from each of the colleges on campus. To address writers’ research needs, we have partnered with our subject-area librarians to provide students with general support, and we have also hired a doctoral candidate in psychology to provide quantitative methodology support. Our methodology tutor has been booked continuously since the new center opened, as have the rest of our tutors. Historically, approximately 50% of our clientele had been MGWs. We have not restricted graduate students from using what is now primarily our undergraduate writing center, and our new graduate center is at capacity; clearly we are tapping into unmet needs with these new services.

Developing a research component for the writing center may not be feasible for everyone, but writing centers that are unable to add an official research

mission to their work could still experiment with other means of supporting writers’ research processes. Partnering with librarians to help students find relevant databases and archives is a reasonable goal for many writing centers. Centers could also actively seek out graduate or professional tutors who had a deep understanding of research methodologies in addition to strong writing abilities. Some tutors already have strong methodology backgrounds; they simply need permission to work with the whole text and the whole writing process. Addressing MGWs’ research needs may be the stickiest of the problems identified here, but it is important enough to bear further study and experimentation.

Finally, taking a holistic approach to the writing of MGWs entails offering true support for sentence-level correction and style instead of discounting those issues as lower-order concerns. These are of concern to other student populations as well, but MGWs especially face discarded conference proposals, publication rejection, and roadblocks to dissertation completion. As Myers argues, “ignoring the sentence, which is a central feature of writing in the texts of both native and non-native speakers, is a disservice to both populations. In the case of ESL students, whose greatest and most consistent difficulties are baldly manifested in the boundaries of the sentence itself, it seems like an eerie kind of denial” (54). Further, the individual nature of the tutoring session makes it an ideal place to address a writer’s individual language-acquisition issues of vocabulary, style, usage, and correctness.

Even if a writer’s sentence-level mistakes do not create comprehension barriers for the reader, they may still represent legitimate global concerns. Correctness is tremendously important for MGWs, who are composing projects for fields where competition is high and correctness plays a larger gatekeeping role. Style is likewise a genuine concern for MGWs in disciplines like journalism or English where style is highly valued. Choices about sentence-level tutoring need to be made while also considering concerns about appropriation (Severino) and creating an unhealthy dependency, although such concerns may not always be justified. Tutors working with MGWs

need to take time to listen to writers and work with them to assess what is really at stake at the sentence level in a specific writing project. In many cases they will find that the sentence really is a lower-order concern; in others they will find that it is quite important to the text's success.

As university communities are increasingly coming to recognize, graduate writers need support too. They are under intense pressure to write with great skill in ways that their undergraduate experiences have not prepared them for. These pressures are multiplied for MGWs who are simultaneously working towards language mastery and whose understanding of genres and disciplinary conventions may be hampered by language comprehension challenges. The writing center can be a powerful resource for graduate writers who are making their way into their fields' discourse communities. But as the experiences of Lan, Bunpot, and Kurie suggest, providing that resource may require that writing centers conceive of "texts" more holistically, and move beyond undergraduate models of tutoring practice.

Notes

1. I use the term "multilingual" to describe the population historically labeled "ESL". The use of "multilingual" has spread within the field of second language writing as scholars attempt to represent students' diverse, complicated linguistic histories (much more than just English as a "second language") and to focus on those linguistic histories as resources instead of markers of deficiency.
2. I have both tutored at and directed this writing center, but I did neither during the period of research.
3. All names are pseudonyms.
4. Erin was a peer in her program, and Ira was a PhD candidate in rhetoric and composition who had completed significant course work in communications.

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