

## TURN-INITIAL MINIMAL RESPONSES IN NES AND NNES STUDENT WRITERS' TALK IN WRITING CENTER CONFERENCES

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### Abstract

Writing center tutors strive to facilitate participation from student writers, particularly student writers who are not native speakers of the conference language. This study investigated one way that tutors might better understand student writers' intent to contribute a substantial turn at talk and thus better understand when they might make way for student writers' active participation. This study examined four minimal responses (MRs)—*mhm*, *uhuh*, *yeah*, and *ok*—at the beginning of student writers' turns at talk. It differentiated between MRs that were free standing, constituting the entire turn and suggesting passive reciprocity, and MRs that were not free standing, suggesting speakership incipency. Importantly, the study differentiated between the MRs of native English speakers (NESs) and non-native English speakers (NNESs). NNESs used free-standing *mhm* far more than NESs, suggesting that the NNESs may have extended the use of *mhm* to a greater array of discourse contexts. NNESs used free-standing *yeah* far more frequently than they did non-free-standing *yeah*, suggesting that *yeah* would not have been a reliable signal for tutors that NNESs would extend their turns at talk. This study also found that both NESs and NNESs used *ok* to signal not only consideration of but also agreement with tutors' evaluations or acceptance of tutors' advice about lower-order concerns. Understanding how MRs vary from passive reciprocity to speakership incipency might help tutors better understand student writers' intent to contribute a substantial turn and thus indicate when tutors might wait for student writers' participation.

Small words tend to go unnoticed, but they can play a substantial role in how a writing center conference unfolds. Words such as *mhm*, *uhuh*, *ok*, and *yeah* are called minimal responses (Coates; Fellegly; Zimmerman and West), though the terminology for them varies somewhat (see, for example, O'Keefe and Adolphs, Thonus, "Listener Responses"). These small words, wrote Gardner, "provide a source of information for participants about the way the talk is developing and the trajectory it is taking" (321). Minimal responses (MRs) signal a conversation's development and trajectory in a variety of ways. For example, they can signal the primary listener<sup>1</sup> has heard what the primary speaker is saying. Such was the case when S40,<sup>2</sup> a native English speaker (NES), used *mhm* to convey that she was following along as T12 explained how to cite specific pages of a source in APA style:

Excerpt 1<sup>3</sup>

T12: Um, you usually go by this way- Let's say it's um like you're citing from a book or something I don't know-

S40: **Mhm.**

T12: and maybe you- you start with a signal phrase like 'This author said blah blah blah.' And then whatever, and this gives an example like this guy [laughs] he described John Adams

S40: [laughs]

T12: as having the blah blah blahs and like um the end of quote and then you just put like P and then a period and the number, the page number-

S40's *mhm* response functioned as what Emanuel Schegloff called a "continuer" (81). Without such signals of listenership from S40, T12 might have behaved otherwise, for example, by stopping to clarify a point or to ask S40 whether she understood. Indeed, Terese Thonus pointed out that MRs assist "in the conversational work of turn-management, monitoring, repair, and politeness" ("Listener Responses" 134). Given their myriad functions, she argued, "death to a conversation" can result if language learners fail to use the target language's listener responses or use inappropriate ones ("Listener Responses" 135).

One important characteristic of turn-initial MRs, particularly *mhm*, *uhuh*, *ok*, and *yeah*, is that they seem to differ on a spectrum of passive reciprocity to speakership incipency. According to Gail Jefferson, a word with passive reciprocity acknowledges that the primary speaker "is still in the midst of some course of talk, and shall go on talking" (200). In contrast, speakership incipency forecasts an intent to switch from the listener role to the primary speaker role. The spectrum indicates the extent to which a person "sticks to a relatively passive role" versus the extent to which a person orients toward continuing past the MR and thus taking the conversational floor (Drummond and Hopper 163). Jefferson proposed that *mhm* (which roughly equates to *uhuh*) signals greater passive reciprocity, frequently constituting a turn in itself (i.e., free standing). Jefferson also wrote that *yeah* signals greater speakership incipency, frequently occurring as the first word in a longer turn (i.e., non-free standing). Still other studies have indicated that *ok* falls somewhere in the middle of this spectrum (Mackiewicz 105; Thonus, "Listener Responses" 135).

In this study, I examined 30 conferences involving NES tutors working with NES and NNES (non-native English speaking) student writers. More specifically, I

examined *mmhm*, *uhhuh*, *yeah*, and *ok* when they appeared turn-initially as non-free-standing MRs and when they constituted an entire turn as free-standing MRs. These four MRs are of interest because they may help signal whether their speaker intends to continue their talk past the initial MR and thus take over the conversational floor. The study also sought to account, at least in part, for the context of student writers' MRs by determining whether student writers produced them in response to a tutor inquiry. Understanding the degree to which these four MRs might vary along the spectrum of passive reciprocity to speakership incipency can help tutors better understand student writers' intent to contribute a substantial turn and thus indicate when tutors might make way for student writers' active participation.

## Literature Review

Writing center scholarship has long examined the discourse of writing center conferences (for example, Carino and Stay; Thonus "Dominance," "How to Communicate"; Wolcott). But despite growing interest in the ways that writing center talk can scaffold student writers' learning (for example, Hewett and Thonus; Mackiewicz; Mackiewicz and Thompson; Thonus ("Acquaintanceship," "Time to Say Goodbye"), few studies have examined the various functions of MRs in writing center conferences, much less noted the role that MRs might play in signaling a student writer's intent to continue talking. Such a study is particularly worthwhile given writing center research indicating that student writers who are non-native speakers of the conference language tend to talk less than native speakers. For example, Thonus found that the ratio of tutors' words to NNES student writers' words was 1.9:1, but their ratio with NES student writers was just 1.3:1 ("NS-NNS Interaction"). However, looking more broadly in linguistics research, researchers have attempted to delineate the functions of various MRs, including *mmhm*, *uhhuh*, *ok*, and *yeah*. I describe these functions below.

### *Uhhuh* and *mmhm*

Much linguistic research has pointed to *uhhuh*'s and *mmhm*'s function as continuers, MRs that convey "an understanding that an extended unit of talk is underway by another, and that it is not yet complete" (Schegloff 81). Similarly, Neal Norrick pointed out that *uhhuh* and *mmhm* signal "a willingness to remain (predominantly) silent, to refrain from interrupting and to attend to the primary speaker" and thus encourage "the speaker to continue with a multi-unit turn" (575). More recently, Ufuk Girgin and Adam Brandt closely examined L2 teachers' use of *mmhm*, determining that it could serve

not only as a signal that students should continue their responses but also as an indicator that the teachers required more talk from students because they did not consider the students' responses to be complete (14).

Even more relevant to writing center conferences was Fiona Farr's study of one-to-one interactions between teacher trainers and their students (i.e., teachers in training) in conferences following a student practice lesson. As part of her analysis, Farr examined frequently occurring MRs in the teacher trainers' talk, including the MRs *mmhm*, *ok*, and *yeah*. Farr found *mmhm* "predominantly" served as a continuer, as opposed to marking "absolute convergence or agreement" (75). Her findings for *mmhm*, then, supported earlier assessments of the MR (for example, Schegloff; Schiffrin).

### *Ok*

The MR *ok* seems to lie somewhere between *mmhm/uhhuh* and *yeah* in the spectrum from passive reciprocity to speakership incipency. Wayne Beach, for example, argued that a primary listener uses *ok* to acknowledge the primary speaker or to signal understanding (329). Farr, too, found that *ok* acknowledged the primary speaker's talk (77). Studying seven one-to-one meetings between NES academic advisors and NES university students, Anna Guthrie found that students used *mmhm* as a continuer and *ok* is an acknowledgement token, meaning that *ok* followed utterances that were "in some way 'more complete'" than the utterances that preceded *mmhm* (402).

### *Yeah*

The MR *yeah* appears to indicate greater speakership incipency than the MRs *mmhm* and *uhhuh*. Studying 10 phone calls that mainly involved friends and family members, Kent Drummond and Robert Hopper counted occurrences of three turn-initial MRs, *yeah*, *uhhuh*, and *mmhm*, with the aim of determining whether they differed in passive reciprocity and speaker incipency. Based on Jefferson's analysis, they hypothesized that *yeah* would show greater speakership incipency, manifested in speakers extending their turn past the MR. In other words, they contrasted free-standing MRs against non-free-standing MRs. They found that *yeah* preceded further speech in about half its occurrences and that *mmhm* and *uhhuh* rarely initiated further speech. Their findings supported Jefferson's argument that *yeah* demonstrates greater speakership incipency than *mmhm*, although their findings also indicated that *yeah* does not guarantee a continued turn.

Indeed, Farr found that in addition to marking "convergence, agreement or confirmation" (75), *yeah*

could acknowledge what the primary speaker had said and encourage the primary speaker to continue. In other words, at times, it could function as a continuer. In short, the first function that Farr articulated, marking “convergence, agreement, or confirmation” is the function that generates *yeah*'s speakership incipency and differentiates it from the passive reciprocity of *mmhm* and *uhhuh*. However, *yeah*'s second function—marking willingness for the primary speaker to continue—overlaps with *mmhm*'s and *uhhuh*'s primary function. In short, turn-initial *yeah* does not always signal speakership incipency, but it correlates with speakership incipency to a far greater extent than *mmhm* and *uhhuh*.

Studying writing center conferences, Jo Mackiewicz found that student writers used *yeah* in the first function—as a token of agreement and as a response to tutors' questions. Noting the increase in keyness<sup>4</sup> of *yeah* from 2000 to 2017, Mackiewicz argued that student writers' more key use of *yeah* in 2017 accorded with the 2017 tutors' training, which focused on prompting student writers' participation (182–183) and which thus likely generated the 2017 student writers' increased use of speakership incipient *yeah*.

To sum up research on the functions of these four MRs, I refer to Thonus's concise summary of the functions of *uhhuh*, *ok*, and *yeah*, which her earlier research on student writers' responses (“Tutor and Student Assessments”) described:

*uhhuh* [and, by extension, *mmhm*]: “I heard what you said.”

*ok*: “I heard and am considering what you said.”

*yeah*: “I agree with what you said.”

(Thonus, “Listener Responses” 135)

Thonus's delineation reveals a spectrum of commitment to the primary speaker's statement from acknowledgement (*uhhuh* and *mmhm*), to consideration (*ok*), to agreement (*yeah*). This spectrum that could correlate with the MRs' placement along the spectrum of passive reciprocity to speakership incipency, with *uhhuh* and *mmhm* on the passive reciprocity end and *yeah* on the speakership incipency end, with *ok* falling somewhere between the two. If tutors understood where these four MRs fall on the spectrum, they could better determine whether student writers intend to take the conversational floor.

## Methods

### Participants

I audio-recorded 30 conferences examined in this study at a small, public university in Wisconsin, in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Of the 30, 15 conferences involved eight tutors working with 15 NES student writers, and 15

conferences involved eight tutors working with 15 NNES student writers. Seven of the eight tutors participated in conferences with both NESs and NNESs. The tutors ranged in age from 19 to 34, averaging about 24. The student writers ranged in age from 17 to 51, averaging about 23. Even though a few of the tutors and student writers were older than traditional college age, all were undergraduates. Most of the tutors were from the United States, specifically, Wisconsin and Minnesota; however, two were international students—one from Canada and one from Ghana. Both tutors were NESs. All the tutors had worked in the writing center for one to two academic years. They had all received at least four weeks of on-the-job training that involved observing, cotutoring, and finally solo tutoring. They had also all received training in tutoring English as a second language (ESL).

The 15 NES student writers were from the United States, specifically Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan. The NNESs were international students from an array of countries: China, Egypt, Italy, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Peru, and South Korea. Student writers sought help on papers from a variety of subjects, including ESL writing, first-year composition, psychology, social work, and sociology. Two sought help with scholarship letters.<sup>6</sup>

### Coding Scheme

In his important work on coding natural-language data, Johnny Saldaña differentiated between lexical/syntactic coding and functional coding. Unlike in functional coding, in lexical/syntactic coding, the items under analysis are explicit in the language data. Thus, those items are more easily and more reliably identified. Identifying the turn-initial MRs *mmhm*, *uhhuh*, *ok*, and *yeah* constituted lexical/syntactic coding. I used a search function to locate all occurrences of the four turn-initial MRs in the student writers' talk. Then, I coded on two axes: (1) free standing versus non-free standing and (2) in response to a tutor inquiry versus not in response to a tutor inquiry. Table 1 (See Appendix A) delineates the four possible types for each MR and its respective codes. Using this scheme, I coded all turn-initial occurrences of the four MRs, a total of 884 occurrences. A second coder checked about 10% of my codes for accuracy.

When a student writer repeated an MR, I counted the occurrence as free standing. For example, I counted S47's *Yeah, yeah* turn as an instance of a free-standing *yeah*:

#### Excerpt 2

T14: “Is that mine or anyone else's gender is what they say it is. One”- And so this is your thesis? I would- Is this your- I would-

S47: **Yeah, yeah.** <Y-IR1>

Michael McCarthy called such occurrences—whether repetitions of the same MR or not—doublets. Referring specifically to repetition doublets, he said, “The doublet may also be a repetition of the same token, again reinforcing convergence or satisfaction with the progress of the conversation” (55). In Excerpt 2, responding to T14’s question (*And so is this your thesis?*), S47’s doublet emphasized T14’s recognition of S47’s thesis statement. MR repetitions included triplets as well.<sup>7</sup>

I did not code phonological variants, such as *yes* and *yep* for *yeah*. I also did not differentiate between phonetic variants, such as *yeah* produced with different intonation contours. As Zimmerman asked of Drummond and Hopper’s study, “A pertinent question here is whether these differences matter interactionally, posing an immediate consideration for distributional analysis: Should such differences be preserved or ignored?” (181–182). This study was limited in that it did not account for intonation differences. However, the present study did account for Zimmerman’s second critique of Drummond and Hopper’s study—their failure to characterize the “sequential environment” beyond the turn-initial MR. Zimmerman pointed out that *yeah* and other MR tokens “can, of course, do other interactional work, for example, provide an affirmative response to questions” (185). For this reason, I separately coded MRs that responded to inquiries.

Because the conferences differed in length, ranging from around 15 minutes to 60 minutes, I normalized the frequencies of the 16 types of MRs. For each conference, I divided the frequency of each type (for example, free-standing, non-inquiry-response *mmhm*) by the total number of student writer turns in the conference, resulting in a ratio of the type’s occurrence in the conference to total student writer turns in the conference. Then, I added the ratios for a total NES and a total NNES ratio for each of the 16 MR types. These totals for each type (reported in Tables 2 and 3 in Appendix A) provided the overall ratio for each group’s total turns: 2,131 total turns for the 15 NESs and 2,372 total turns for the 15 NNESs.

## Results and Discussion

The turn-initial MRs in NESs’ and NNESs’ talk manifested several differences, both in their non-inquiry response turns and in their responses to tutors’ inquiries. I discuss these results in the sections below.

### Turn-Initial MRs in Non-Inquiry-Response Turns

Table 2 (See Appendix A) shows the proportions of student writers’ MR-initial turns that were not in response to a tutor inquiry in proportion to their total turns at talk. First, it shows that although *uhhuh* is an alternative to *mmhm* (Thonus, “Listener Responses” 135), NESs did not use it turn-initially and NNESs used it only rarely. Table 2 also shows that both NESs and NNESs used free-standing *mmhm* a greater proportion of the time than they did non-free-standing *mmhm* (NES, 0.182 versus 0.066; NNES, 0.456 versus 0.158). This result supported the finding of prior research: *Mmhm* appears to convey passive reciprocity—the willingness to allow one’s interlocutor to continue to talk.

NNESs relied on free-standing *mmhm* more than NESs did (0.456 versus 0.182), using it where a NES would likely use some other response instead. For example, at the end of her conference with T17, rather than acknowledging T17’s praise with *ok* or with *thanks*, S68, a NNES, responded instead with free-standing *mmhm*.

#### Excerpt 3

T17: Yay! Ok. Perfect time. It’s one thirty. Um. Yeah, it looks good. You have really good ideas.

S68: **Mmhm.** <M1>

T17: Um. Your intro’s good. Your conclusion’s good. Yeah. Just um, minor grammatical plural, singular, which you knew was-

S68: Yeah, <Y> I know. Yay!

T17: Correct.

S68: Thank you so much.

While she in the end thanked T17 for her help throughout the conference, S68’s initial *mmhm* response differed from what a NES might use.

Similarly, S49, a NNES, responded with *mmhm* to T13’s praise, which T13 delivered after reading through S49’s entire paper:

#### Excerpt 4

T13: “Three types of arguments, such as pathos, ethos and logos, and various examples and exact information.” Yeah, um, those are really specific details. Um, it’s very good.

S49: **Mmhm.** <M1>

T13: The only thing I’ve been noticing far is, um, a couple things with, um, the tense and issues of, uh-Like here. “He explains that there are three principles to make human life flourishes.”

A NES might have instead responded to T13’s positive assessment with *thanks* or *cool*, but would not likely have responded with free-standing *mmhm*, as in Excerpt 4. Situations like this elevated NNESs’ ratio of turns consisting of free-standing *mmhm*.

As noted before, prior research has indicated that *ok* seems to rest somewhere between the passive reciprocity of *mmhm* and the speakership incipency of *yeah* (for example, Mackiewicz 70; Thonus, "Listener Responses," "Tutor and Student Assessments"). In this study, both NESs and NNESs used free-standing *ok* in a greater proportion of their turns than they did non-free-standing *ok* (NES, 0.640 versus 0.361; NNES, 0.807 versus 0.059). This result suggested that, for both groups, *ok* was more likely to convey passive reciprocity than it was speakership incipency. Indeed, both groups' use of free-standing *ok* surpassed their use of free-standing *mmhm*.

As seen in prior research (Mackiewicz 69; Thonus, "Listener Responses"), student writers used free-standing *ok* to signal their understanding and consideration of what tutors had said. However, in some cases involving tutors' advice about lower-order concerns, such as subject-verb agreement, NESs' and NNESs' use of *ok* seemed to convey more than just consideration; it seemed to indicate agreement. For example, S64, a NES, used free-standing *ok* in response to T13's explanation and suggestions:

Excerpt 5

T13: Yeah. Even though it sounds weird, um, but if you're referring to "they," it has to be a person. Or

actually a group of people, technically, but-

S64: **Ok.** <OK1>

T13: Yeah. Yeah. Or you could even just say, 'the company.' That might actually sound better.

S64: **Ok.** <OK1>

T13: Um, and then you would say 'uses.'

S64: **Ok.** <OK1>

T13: "Colors and the need to dominate." What does that mean?

S64: It was one of the things, on- She gave us like a list, I don't- I think it was online, I can't remember.

T13: Ok.

S64's free-standing *ok* responses seemed to indicate that S64 was prepared to implement what T13 was suggesting about changing the subject of the sentence and then changing the verb to agree with it in number. Indeed, T13 switched topics after S64's third *ok* without S64 interjecting a question or comment about T13's advice.

In NNESs' talk, *ok* seemed to have this dual function as well in the context of talk related to lower-order concerns. It indicated understanding and consideration, but it also could indicate agreement, as when S72, a NNES, used free-standing *ok* when T14 directed S72 in how to change her wording for clarity:

Excerpt 6

T14: Ok. Yep, makes sense. Did you observe more than one judge or was it just one?

S72: Just one.

T14: Just one? Ok. Then will we use 'the' here.

S72: **Ok.** <OK1>

T14: Ok, let's just go over this, like, first couple paragraphs, these two.

Like S64, S72 seemed to use *ok* to signal that she had no objection to accepting T14's advice about the use of the definite article before the noun *judge*.

Both NESs and NNESs used free-standing *ok* more than they used non-free-standing *ok*, a finding that suggests, for student writers, *ok* may lie closer to the passive reciprocity end of the spectrum than it does the speakership incipency end. Indeed, although NESs used non-free-standing *ok* (0.361), NNESs hardly used non-free-standing *ok* at all (0.059). These results suggest that tutors should not necessarily expect that student writers—particularly NNESs—will extend their *ok*-initial turns to create a more substantial turn at talk.

More so than in the cases of *mmhm* and *ok*, this study found differences between NESs' and NNESs' use of turn-initial *yeah*. The NESs used non-free-standing *yeah* quite often and far more rarely used free-standing *yeah* (0.611 versus 0.104). The NNESs' use of *yeah* was more complicated. They used non-free-standing *yeah* fairly often (0.325), but, they used free-standing *yeah* a far greater proportion of the time (0.782). These results suggest that the proposed speakership incipency of *yeah*—the intent to continue the turn past the MR—held in the case of NESs but not necessarily in the case of NNESs. Often, NNESs used free-standing *yeah* as they did free-standing *mmhm* and *ok*, for example, to signal a willingness to allow their interlocutor to continue, as S51, a NNES, did:

Excerpt 7

T15: I would- So you would say, 'I was standing'

S51: Mmhm. <M1>

T15: 'Out.' I would maybe say 'more' because that kind of like represents the change.

S51: **Yeah.** <Y1>

T15: 'I was standing out more at the time.'

In the case in Excerpt 7, *yeah* worked much like S51's *mmhm* in her preceding turn did—to signal attention and a desire for T15 to complete her point.

Overall, in MR-initial turns that did not respond to a tutor inquiry, NNESs used free-standing *mmhm*, *ok*, and *yeah* in a greater proportion of their turns at talk than the NESs did. In the case of *yeah*, the difference between NESs and NNESs was particularly striking. These findings suggest that NESs are likely to use turn-initial *yeah* for speakership incipency, expanding their turns

past the initial MR, but they also suggest that turn-initial *yeah* does not promise the same speakership incipency for NNEs.

#### *Turn-Initial MRs in Inquiry-Response Turns*

MR-initial turns responding to tutor inquiries composed smaller total ratios of student writers' total turns, as Table 3 shows (See Appendix A). As with turn-initial MRs not in response to tutor inquiries, *uhhuh* was little used by either NESs or NNEs in inquiry-response turns. In addition, both NESs and NNEs infrequently used turn-initial *ok* to respond to tutors' inquiries. However, differences between NESs' and NNEs' use of the other MRs manifested in their conference talk. As Table 3 shows, NESs responded to tutor inquiries with a non-free-standing *yeah* over two times as often as they did a free-standing *yeah* (0.234 versus 0.108), meaning that they tended to expand upon their turn-initial *yeah* to create a more substantive answer. This finding, too, is in keeping with the idea that, in the case of NESs, *yeah* demonstrates greater speakership incipency than *mhm*, *uhhuh*, and *ok*.

One important context in which NESs and, to some extent, NNEs as well, used non-free-standing *yeah* in response to tutors' inquiries was in the opening stage of the conference, where the tutor and the student writer engaged in agenda setting. As Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson found, student writers tend to contribute more talk in the opening stage—the stage in the conference in which student writers' expertise about the assignment and their aims for the paper are at the forefront (69–70). For example, S53, a NES, expanded upon his turn-initial *yeah* response to T15's question:

Excerpt 8

T15: Did you have the assignment sheet with you?

S53: **Yeah** <Y-IR>, that's the first one we had. Like, that's the rubric- I don't know what to do for the first one to be honest so-

T15: Ok.

In his response, S53 answered the yes-no question with his turn-initial *yeah*, but then he moved on to provide some detail about the assignment sheet, namely, that it contained a rubric and that he was not yet sure how to respond to the prompt it contained.

Besides expanding their turns in the opening stage, student writers also marked speakership incipency with *yeah* in the teaching stage of their conferences—the longest stage by far and the stage in which “the main pedagogical work of the conference takes place” (Mackiewicz and Thompson 71). In these cases, student writers responded affirmatively to the tutor's question and then expanded on the topic. This was the case when

S39, a NES, answered T11's question about using *were* rather than *are*:

Excerpt 9

T11: “Its release- Its release proved to citizens that there are secrets of the Vietnam war lying beneath what the government was conveying to them, threatening the credibility. Its release proved to citizens that there”- Do you want to use, like, ‘were’?

S39: **Yeah**. <Y-IR> I think I'm going to change this to ‘this release showed citizens that there are secrets that.’ Yeah.

T11 asked S39 about a change from present to past tense (*are* to *were*). S39 answered in the affirmative with *yeah* but then moved forward to discuss how he would revise the sentence in other ways, such as changing *proved* to *showed*.

As noted above, once again, the speakership incipency of *yeah* did not manifest to the same extent in NNEs' talk; NNEs used free-standing *yeah* a greater proportion of the time (0.389) than they did non-free-standing *yeah* (0.099). For example, S43, a NNE, used free-standing *yeah* twice in response to T10's questions, which were seemingly aimed to get S43 to brainstorm ideas for his introduction. In the introduction, S43 needed to discuss his reasons for choosing the topic of social activism in response to climate change:

Excerpt 10

T10: Why did you choose to talk about or why did you choose to read about global warming and social activism? Um I mean that was an intentional choice, right? Like, you- you made that choice.

S43: **Yeah**. <Y-IR1>

T10: You could've chosen a lot of things. But why did you choose those particular subjects?

S43: **Yeah**. <Y1>

T10: The conclusion is about more the topic, right? You're talking something about global warming. Maybe some things that the blog post talks about, and you're concluding something about global warming. Maybe you really do feel like it's a problem.

In response to T10's yes-no question, *Um I mean that was an intentional choice, right?*, S43's free-standing *yeah* provided just the required response, that is, a *yes* (or *yeah*) or a *no*. T10 persisted, however, by switching to a *wh*-question instead—a question with a greater chance of getting more than a one-word response from S43. Nevertheless, S43 again responded only with *yeah*. After hitting this discourse wall, T10 moved on to another topic—the subject matter for the paper's conclusion.

Besides NESs' and NNEs' use of turn-initial *yeah*, another finding that stood out was NNEs' use of free-

standing *mmhm* in response to a tutor inquiry. Their proportion of use (0.353) substantially exceeded that of NESs (0.048), which was in keeping with the overall trend that NNESs used free-standing MRs more than NESs did. In the case of free-standing *mmhm* in response to an inquiry, NNESs used free-standing *mmhm* as a positive response to a yes-no question. For example, in Excerpt 11, T17's question was aimed at ensuring that S74's sentence conveyed what he intended. To do this, T17 needed to ask a question about the topic of the paper—the learning process:

Excerpt 11

T17: "Got results from the association of two or more events or stimuli." So changes in an organism's behavior is the result of from the association of two or more events?

S74: **Mmhm.** <M-IR1>

T17: 'Organism behavior got results.'

T17's question, what Thompson and Mackiewicz called a knowledge-deficit question in that it was aimed at obtaining information truly unknown to the asker (42), received a free-standing *mmhm* in response from S74, a NNES, as opposed to the *yeah* (either free standing or non-free standing) that a NES might have been more likely to use. More than a turn-initial *yeah*, a *mmhm* response might convey the intention to bypass the opportunity to speak and to allow the tutor to continue contributing most of the conference talk.

## Conclusion

This study investigated turn-initial *mmhm*, *uhhuh*, *ok*, and *yeah* in NES and NNES student writers' talk as a way that tutors might better understand when they might make way for student writers' active participation. In the case of NESs, the findings supported expectations about *mmhm*'s greater passive reciprocity and *yeah*'s greater speakership incipency. NESs used free-standing *mmhm* a greater proportion of the time than they did non-free-standing *mmhm* (0.182 versus 0.066). In addition, NESs used free-standing *yeah* a smaller proportion of the time than they did non-free-standing *yeah* (0.104 versus 0.611). They were likely to extend their turn past *yeah*. This finding suggests that tutors can interpret a NES's *yeah*-initial response as a signal that the turn may very well continue. This finding might help tutors determine when to stay silent to make room for NESs' contributions.

However, one finding countered expectations: In the case of non-inquiry-response turns, NESs used free-standing *ok* even more than they used free-standing *mmhm*. Closer analysis suggested that they used free-standing *ok* to indicate consideration of tutors'

evaluations and advice, as prior research would suggest (Mackiewicz; Thonus, "Listener Responses," "Tutor and Student Assessments"). But this study also found that when discussing lower-order concerns, student writers might also use *ok* to signal agreement with tutors' evaluations or acceptance of tutors' advice.

NNESs' use of turn-initial MRs differed somewhat from NESs' use of them. NNESs used free-standing *mmhm* far more than NESs—both in inquiry and non-inquiry responses. These findings suggest that the NNESs may have extended the use of *mmhm* to a greater array of discourse contexts, including contexts that would lend themselves to a more substantial response. In addition, in both non-inquiry responses and inquiry responses, NNESs used free-standing *yeah* far more frequently than they did non-free-standing *yeah*. Indeed, in their inquiry responses, NNESs hardly used non-free-standing *yeah* at all. These findings suggest that *yeah* did not have the same speakership incipency for NNESs and thus would not have been a reliable signal for tutors that NNESs would extend their turns at talk.

These findings suggest that tutors might prompt student writers for further clarification, as T12 did when S62, a NNES, responded to her suggestion to move a sentence containing the definition of *death anxiety* to the beginning of a paragraph:

Excerpt 12

T12: I think it should, um- It should come in the beginning of a paragraph, because you- you, um, describe it, and then you go on to give, um, certain symptoms that accompany the disorder, and then you give an example. So it's like definition, symptoms, and then an example.

S62: Oh, ok, so this whole paragraph in the beginning.

T12: No, I was just referring to this.

S62: Ah, just this?

T12: Yeah, this sentence.

S62: **Ok.** <OK1>

T12: **Or, what- what- what do you think?**

S62: Um, I'm just thinking, how can I, like, organize this? I put this, and then- This is the example, and th- this is another example. No, this is the explanation.

T12: I think, um, yeah I think this and this and this- Yeah, I think that- I think that will work. Yeah, but if you do it and you're not sure, you can always come back to double check.

In Excerpt 12, S62's free-standing *ok* indicated that she had heard T12's suggestion for organizing the paragraph and was considering it, but even so T12 pushed S62 to elaborate on her *ok* minimal response. Specifically, she used an open-ended pumping question (Mackiewicz and

Thompson 107), which pushed S62 to think out loud about the paragraph's potential organization: *Or, what-what-what do you think?* With this pumping question, T12 succeeded in getting S62 to further analyze the content of her paragraph, differentiating examples from explanation, and thus in helping her evaluate T12's suggestion about paragraph organization. Such pumping questions constitute a useful tool with which tutors can press student writers to contribute more substantial turns at talk. Particularly when working with NNEs, tutors may need to employ extra effort to clarify student writers' intent and to help them extend their turns beyond the minimal.

# Notes

1. Farr, discussing the importance of "showing listenership," pointed out that at any point in an interaction, one person "plays the role of primary speaker and the other the primary listener" (69).
2. S refers to student-writer; 40 indicates that this person was the fortieth student writer to participate in the study. I use T for tutor.
3. See Appendix B for transcription conventions.
4. Keyness means occurring with significantly more frequency in a study corpus than in a reference corpus. Keywords thus indicate what a study corpus is about.
5. Data collection and analysis were approved by the IRB of Iowa State University, the researcher's affiliation. In addition, they were approved by the IRB of the University of Wisconsin-Superior (UWS), where data collection occurred.
6. See Mackiewicz for more detail about the study's writing center setting and its participants.
7. Indeed, I found a quintuplet. S49 signaled understanding and agreement with T13's articulation of the relationship between the article's writer and the government:  
T13: Because he is- He is an international advisor on education for the government.  
S49: Ah.  
T13: Because then that's saying that he's employed-  
S49: Oh, ah.  
T13: By the government. Or he gives advice to the government, rather.  
S49: **Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah.** <Y1>  
T13: Mmhm.
8. Mackiewicz, Jo, and Thompson, Isabelle. "Spoken Written-Language in Writing Center Talk." *Linguistics and Education*, vol. 47, 2018, pp. 47–58.

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## Appendix A: Tables

Table 1: Minimal response types and their codes.

Minimal Response Types	Code
<i>Mmhm</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free standing, non-inquiry response</li> <li>Non-free standing, non-inquiry response</li> <li>Free standing, inquiry response</li> <li>Non-free standing, inquiry response</li> </ul>	<M1> <M> <M-IR1> <M-IR>
<i>Ok</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free standing, non-inquiry response</li> <li>Non-free standing, non-inquiry response</li> <li>Free standing, inquiry response</li> <li>Non-free standing, inquiry response</li> </ul>	<OK1> <OK> <OK-IR1> <OK-IR>
<i>Yeah</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free standing, non-inquiry response</li> <li>Non-free standing, non-inquiry response</li> <li>Free standing, inquiry response</li> <li>Non-free standing, inquiry response</li> </ul>	<Y1> <Y> <Y-IR1> <Y-IR>
<i>Uhhuh</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free standing, non-inquiry response</li> <li>Non-free standing, non-inquiry response</li> <li>Free standing, inquiry response</li> <li>Non-free standing, inquiry response</li> </ul>	<U1> <U> <U-IR1> <U-IR>

Table 2: Total proportions of MR-initial turns to total student-writer turns, excluding student-writer turns in response to a tutor inquiry. Total NES turns = 2,131; total NNES turns = 2,372.

MR Type	MR Code	NESs	NNESs
<i>mmhm</i> , free standing	<M1>	0.182	0.456
<i>mmhm</i> , non-free standing	<M>	0.066	0.158
<i>ok</i> , free standing	<OK1>	0.640	0.807
<i>ok</i> , non-free standing	<OK>	0.361	0.059
<i>yeah</i> , free standing	<Y1>	0.104	0.782
<i>yeah</i> , non-free standing	<Y>	0.611	0.325
<i>uhhuh</i> , free standing	<U1>	0	0.015
<i>uhhuh</i> , non-free standing	<U>	0	0.027

Table 3: Proportion of minimal-response-initial turns to total student-writer turns in response to a tutor inquiry. Total NES turns = 2,131; total NNES turns = 2,372.

MR Type	MR Type	NESs	NNESs
<i>mmhm</i> , free standing	<M-IR1>	0.048	0.353
<i>mmhm</i> , non-free standing	<M-IR>	0.030	0
<i>ok</i> , free standing	<OK-IR1>	0	0
<i>ok</i> , non-free standing	<OK-IR>	0.026	0
<i>yeah</i> , free standing	<Y-IR1>	0.108	0.389
<i>yeah</i> , non-free standing	<Y-IR>	0.234	0.099
<i>uhhuh</i> , free standing	<U-IR1>	0	0.017
<i>uhhuh</i> , non-free standing	<U-IR>	0	0

## **Appendix B: Transcription Conventions**

This study employed orthographic transcription. The following extralinguistic features were transcribed in addition to the spoken words:

- Silent reading, with “reading silently” in brackets, as in [reading silently]
- Occurrences of unintelligible talk, with “unclear” in brackets, as in [unclear]
- Laughter, with “laughs” in brackets, as in [laughs]
- Pauses longer than one second, with the number of seconds in brackets, as in [2s]
- Pauses one second or less, with a comma
- Rising intonation for an inquiry, with a question mark
- Cut off speech, with a hyphen
- Reference to a word as a word, with double quotation marks, as in the following example:  
S: I had “tell” but the computer wouldn’t let me do “tell.” It kept underlining it and saying “tells.”
- Occurrences of overlapping talk, denoted with brackets as in the following exchange:  
T: Ok. Alright. Well, thanks for coming by. I’ll give you your stuff back here. And I just keep this so I can put it in the computer. [So. But, um, you have a good day  
S: Uhhuh.  
T: and I hope that it goes well for you.
- Occurrences of reading aloud, with double quotation marks, as in the following example:  
“For example, in the article, there is an example.” Uh, you could say-
- Spoken written-language (SWL),<sup>8</sup> with single quotation marks, as in the following example:  
‘Like, one character, Momma Gump,’ dot dot dot.