

# Peer Tutoring in Academic Writing with Non-Native Writers in a German Writing Center – Results of an Empirical Study

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## Abstract

Peer tutoring non-native writers seems to pose particular challenges to tutors with regard to the overall goals and principles of peer tutoring that have been expressed in the literature. Principles such as non-directivity and long-term emphasis on the process quality of writing are often assumed to be in conflict with non-native writers' desire to be *actively* and *directly guided* in their process of learning to write in a foreign language. Peer tutoring's appropriateness therefore remains rather controversial within this particular context. In this article we outline the results of an empirical study focusing on the potential, as well as the limitations, of peer tutoring with regard to non-native writers in a German writing center. Using the method of qualitative content analysis designed to achieve a healthy balance between deductive and inductive aspects of empirical research, we ask the open question: 'How do peer tutors deal with non-native writers?' Results show that the limitations of rigid peer tutoring principles become obvious more quickly with non-native writers. However, peer tutoring with non-native writers reveals larger potential, too, and can offer recommendations for peer tutoring in general.

## Introduction

Since its reestablishment in 1991, shortly after the German reunification, the European University Viadrina (EUV) in Frankfurt (Oder) has strictly adhered to its concept of being a bridge-builder for people, nations and cultures. Intercultural competences, therefore, are integral aspects of our daily work. Given its geographical position at the Polish border and its role as liaison between Central and Eastern Europe, its emphasis on curricular multiple language competencies, as well as its student mobility percentage of 23 of foreign students from 95 different nations (EUV 2013a and EUV 2013b), every unit at our university *practices* border-crossing substantially.

The writing center at our university conceives of writing as a key competence, particularly important within the academic field. The tutoring praxis is based on the method of *peer tutoring* as it is known from US writing centers (Bruffee 1984, Reigstad and McAndrew 1984, Gillespie and Lerner 2000, and Ryan and Zimmerelli 2010). Overall, this includes a minimalist (Brooks 1991) or non-directive approach (Rogers 2012). For example, tutors do not judge whether writers' texts are written well or not. Instead, they ask open ended questions to help writers detect their texts' weaknesses on their own. Furthermore, they usually focus on dealing with higher order concerns, like the structure of a text, before working on lower order concerns, like grammar or punctuation. During peer tutoring sessions our peer tutors try to give

feedback on drafts or thoughts within this paradigm of focusing on higher order concerns and of non-directiveness. They also try to support writers in their writing processes with techniques like freewriting or by providing handouts. They aim at making the process character of writing visible and should be aware of the limitations of their roles as peer tutors, e.g. with regard to content questions or psychological issues of writers. In sum, our peer writing tutors are educated<sup>1</sup> according to common writing center peer tutoring guides (see above) and try to follow Steven North's famous axiom to 'produce better writers, not better writing' (North 1995: 76).

These principles are often debated and criticized in the literature. For example, Grimm (1999) criticized this approach as a white middle-class enterprise not designed to meet the needs of students from other classes, ethnicities or cultures (see also Grimm 2003 and 2009). Babcock and Thonus prefer to call these principles 'lore' rather than *theoretical* principles (Babcock and Thonus 2012), due to a lack of systematical research into their effectiveness for writing center tutorials. However, they are still the main principles writing center tutors usually learn during tutor education and the basic methods for peer tutors at the writing center at our university. When we talk about peer tutoring in the following text, we refer to this approach.

Despite criticism of the overall principles behind it, there is much evidence that peer tutoring is working out well (Fallon 2010, research overview in Babcock *et al.* 2012), – at least when tutors get a profound peer tutor education that is ongoing as long as they work in the Writing Center (cf. Geller *et al.* 2007 and O'Neill, Harrington and Bakhshi 2009). However, skepticism remains, especially regarding the question of how far peer tutoring in writing is transferable across languages and cultures (cf. Santa 2009 and Harbord 2003). There is a steadily growing body of literature about working with writers who write in a foreign or second language (L2) in writing centers (e.g. Bruce and Rafoth 2009, Grieshammer 2008, Weigle and Nelson 2004, Cumming and So 1996, and Blau, Hall and Sparks 2001). Most of the literature refers to the English language. Babcock and Thonus (2012) investigated writing center research and found that Chiu (2011 cited in Babcock and Thonus 2012) recommends writing centers as more helpful for L2 writers than classroom instruction. According to Thonus (in press; cited in Babcock and Thonus 2012), negotiation of language within a tutorial is more sustainable than simply telling the writer the rules. However, Babcock and Thonus (2012: 100) found that '[s]tudy after study has discovered that L2 writers tend to view tutors as more authoritative than L1 writers', which might suggest a contradiction to the value of negotiation versus simply telling. Non-directive tutoring, as it is usually recommended for writing center tutors, is often indirect and can be problematic for L2 writers as well as for their tutors. For example, Blau, Hall and Sparks (2002: 23) cite a peer tutor who complains about problems with nondirective tutoring while working with ESL students: 'I try so hard to stick to the guidelines we learned, but it's so frustrating'. In their synthesis of qualitative writing center research, Babcock *et al.* (2012) found that L1 tutors often take control of writing center sessions with L2 writers, while the L2 writers often tend to expect more directive feedback than writing center tutors would usually give. Also, more time is spent on the mechanics of papers instead of working on higher order concerns (Babcock *et al.* 2012: 24).

All in all, the literature suggests that writing center tutorials seem to be helpful for L2 writers. However, values like non-directivity and a focus on higher order concerns might not always be appropriate when working with foreign students. In our own writing center we noticed the same ambiguity between peer tutoring principles tutors learned and their practice working with L2 writers. We therefore decided to follow the call for more systematic and empirical research in writing centers (e.g. Babcock and Thonus 2012) and conducted an empirical study<sup>2</sup> that analyzes non-native writer consultation settings.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'education' here rather than 'training' because our tutors go through a profound education program consisting of three university classes (12 European Credit Transfer Points). Furthermore, the term education stresses the ongoing character of peer tutors' learning.

<sup>2</sup> The complete study is published in German (Voigt 2011).

## Research Design: Question and database

Our study focuses on the potential and limitations of the method of peer tutoring in assisting students who are writing in a non-native language. We will therefore use the term non-native German speaker/writer (NNG) to include speakers/writers of German as a foreign or second language.

Instead of an attempt to evaluate our tutors' work in accordance with the basic principles of peer tutoring in question, our qualitative approach was very open and asked the simple question: 'How do our peer tutors deal with NNGs in their tutoring sessions?' Our overall aim for the study was to gain a clearer picture of tutoring sessions with NNGs and to understand better what happens, so that we could prepare our peer tutors better in the future.

As material for the study we chose 2-3 pages long consultation records the tutors had been advised to complete immediately after each session over the course of several months. Here, they reported what they thought the most fundamental problems of the particular tutee were, which specific steps they worked out collaboratively, and they also reflected on the overall progress and their roles as tutors in general.

The most important of the consultation records' several functions is that they serve as a learning tool for the peer tutors themselves. Reflective writing gives them a chance to think deeply about what was and is going on and to ensure ongoing learning. All records are available for all team members and some of them will be discussed in our team meetings, which take place every other week. Furthermore, the second function of the records is to brief other peer tutors about what was going on in case they work with the same students in another session. Another function is to provide necessary data to prove what is going on in the writing center for our stakeholders. And finally, these records can be a good database for writing center research.

We therefore make sure that we explain all these functions to writers who use the Writing Center the first time and ask for their permission for this. With regard to using the records for research we of course know that they do not give an objective picture of a session, but deliver a picture of the peer tutor's perception of a session. Tutoring writing is a very demanding and complex task, and peer tutors should mainly concentrate on the writer and the text, not on note taking. This clearly limits the data we get, for example in comparison to videotaping a session. On the other hand, note taking and recapitulating does not disturb a session in a way a camera might do. Another limitation for using records written by peer tutors is that peer tutors are well educated in writing center pedagogies and therefore clearly know how a session *should* work in the best case. It might be a temptation to paint a nicer picture. However, we are sure that the climate within our team does encourage peer tutors to see failures and mistakes in writing center sessions not as bad issues, but as learning chances. We appreciate when peer tutors write about how they struggled in a session and use these cases as learning opportunities for the whole team when we discuss them in our team meetings. All in all we came to the conclusion that the records are a good starting point for research about sessions with non-native writers. For the analysis, we chose all 32 records of tutoring sessions with NNGs in one semester.

## Data analysis

To analyze the very specific communicative action documented in those consultation records, we used the method of 'Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse' (*qualitative content analysis*) developed by Mayring (2000 and 2008). The written material - taken from 32 consultation records - was reconstructed as a system of categories in which each element of the material stays clearly recognizable, and can be traced back to its origin in the data. The content analysis is a rule-governed method that systematically arranges ordinary understanding of the subject matter to gain adequate research-based descriptions.

The key tool to represent the wealth of information without falling short of the normative character of the

tutoring situation is a category system, in this case *two* category systems derived by using deductive as well as inductive techniques. In the course of developing the deductive category system, we drew up categories based on principles of peer tutoring outlined above: Non-directiveness and working with higher order concerns first, and the practical tasks of giving feedback, facilitating the work with techniques and handouts, communicating process orientation and being aware of the limitations of peer tutoring.

The threefold strategy Mayring proposes for establishing category systems is initially to define which text passage falls under one category, secondly to find theory-based examples, and in the third place to formulate rules in case clear assignment of a passage to one or more categories is, for whatever reason, rather problematic. To clarify the procedure we want to go through it using one example.

In theory, one goal of writing tutoring is to convey certain writing techniques, methods or exercises. Given the study's overall question of how the writing tutoring deals with NNGs, an action would have to be identifiable as concrete presentation of one or more writing techniques, for example freewriting or mind maps. At the stage of the very first theory-orientated sketch of the category system, this idea was represented as a category simply called *convey techniques*, which was defined as follows: 'This category subsumes all intentions on part of the tutors to convey certain writing techniques to the tutee.' As a standard example we used one paraphrased maxim from an essay by Ella Grieshammer (2008) on the writing process of non-native writers: 'Sidestep the problem of the 'empty page' by introducing the use of associative methods.' Finally, in order to wrap up the category, the following rule of encoding was defined: 'This category includes all actions referring to specific writing techniques and methods. Delineation from strategies of revising as well as actions of feedback in general is ensured by means of the introduction of specific techniques. Overall conceptual ambitions as well as advanced background assumptions of writing tutoring are left out.'

Formed in this preliminary way, the category and its responsiveness towards the data were tested. Here it occurred to us quite quickly that the category had to be redefined. As a result, the following new definition was given: 'This category subsumes all intentions on part of the tutor to convey certain writing techniques and the application of writing exercises to the tutee. Furthermore, the category covers actions of conveying strategies of reading as well as actions of discussing handouts provided by the Writing Center.' The example constructed from Grieshammer's phrase was replaced by a passage from the consultation records: 'Furthermore, I suggested she could write a short synopsis'.

We subsequently analyzed the consultation records according to their correspondence with each previously defined category, and modified the system of categories where necessary. In this way, we successively adjusted the category system to the material. The next step was to paraphrase the exemplifying citations and to extract them out of the consultation records. The paraphrases had to be generalized with regard to a given level of abstraction, and then again to be reduced, in order to subsume the categories into more general ones. Finally, the categories and the matching citations were merged into subcategories, and after that into main categories.

In a preliminary manner then, the applicability of the resulting deductive categories towards the data was tested while already constantly readjusting the categories to the object of investigation. In order to analyze the material with respect to our main question, we chose three different ways of verifying and interpreting the systems of categories. One way of analyzing the material according to the category systems was to conduct a frequency analysis with rather quantitative significance, so that, for example, a maximum of 15 cases of text passages corresponding to a certain category means 'frequently responded', and 1 case means 'rarely responded'. Furthermore, we performed an analysis of only those categories that refer to writing itself and thirdly a comparative analysis and interpretation of both systems of categories. The results were a thick and detailed, but abstract description of the peer tutors' work with NNGs. Below we are going to share some of the most significant results.

## Results

All in all the results of the analysis confirm that peer tutoring with NNGs is likely to show the limitations of peer tutoring principles tutors learn during tutor education. Take as preliminary evidence the fact that in many of the records analyzed tutors felt the need to reflect upon the particular situation, as well as the challenges of tutoring an NNG (inductive category 24, 'commenting on the consultation of NNGs', triggered 15 times in 10 records of the overall 32 records<sup>3</sup>).

One of the most frequently triggered categories in the inductive system concerns the topic of 'proofreading' (inductive category 57 'questions about proofreading the text', triggered 20 times in 15 records). When confronted with requests to proofread the text of the tutee – especially, of course, for linguistic deficiencies – the tutors often reacted by giving feedback to particular sections, or by going through a sample passage with the tutee.

Thus, peer tutors often did not follow the principle of the priority of higher order concerns. Furthermore, they often could not stick to being non-directive when working on lower order concerns. Working on lower order concerns according to NNG's demands for proofreading often led tutors to the feeling that a process orientation was not possible during the tutoring session because they had to focus on the end product. That is perhaps why tutors, as the analysis revealed, often felt the need to explain their work to the tutees and tried to make tutees familiar with the principles of the Writing Center's work in general (for example, inductive category 31 'explaining the scope of writing consultation', triggered 14 times in 13 records). To give just two examples from the protocols: 'I therefore told him that, in writing consultation, we strictly do not proofread texts, but only give feedback to particular passages if requested' (Protocol 13), and 'First I tell her what the overall range of our support program is, what kinds of questions she should expect us to engage in, and that we keep records of sessions' (Protocol 6). These passages show that tutors, as they are confronted most frequently with questions on proofreading, almost naturally tend to explain their work by way of explaining its *limitations*.

Although peer tutors often felt that they could not *work* in a process-oriented way, they often tried to *convey* the concept of writing as a process practically. Thus, while, for the aforementioned reasons, tutors hardly had any opportunity to take the initiative to explain the concept of process orientation (inductive category 14 'emphasize that a writing process is executed in a step-by-step manner', triggered 5 times in 5 records), they often suggested techniques and strategies closely connected to it. Here are two examples from the protocols: 'We looked at some exemplary sentences from her text, and then I suggested to her to go through the three-step procedure<sup>4</sup> in order to get to a working title' (Protocol 4); 'I stress that coming into the consultation from the very early stages of a project is particularly advisable' (Protocol 1). From both these passages one can infer that process-oriented strategies and techniques are often applied in the sessions, while at same time not being explicitly referred to, that is, as something that is supposed to help the tutee understand her project as such a process, and take control of it via a range of suitable techniques.

Work with handouts, e.g. for citation rules, or techniques, e.g. Mindmapping, often happened during the tutoring sessions. While it is an intended benefit of writing techniques themselves to get control of the

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<sup>3</sup> In the following we want this frequency information to mean the following: The first number (here: 15 times) states the total amount of statements or passages that triggered a certain category which was originally derived in an inductive way from a specific statement. This implies that within the first number indication there can be included more than one triggering instance for a certain category within a *single* record. This is why with the second number (here: X) we specify the number of *records* out of the total number of 32 records in which the category in question was triggered. For all following ratio details on a specific category we will dispense with restating the total number of records being 32 for sake of convenience.

<sup>4</sup> The *three step procedure* is a technique that works with pattern sentences to guide students to a research question, based on recommendations by Booth et al. (2008).

writing process in its different phases, as, for example, laid out by Gillespie and Learner (2000), the potential of process orientation proves to be insufficiently developed in practice. Stemming from the fact that most of the NNGs came to the consultations at rather advanced stages of their particular writing projects, writing techniques and methods were mostly introduced and handled as tools for concrete problems or incidents, which means that they were introduced with focus on the specific text product. As far as our analysis goes, it is hard to find clear evidence that writing techniques are introduced and used according to their intended self-standing benefits, nor is it likely that they are utilized to their full potential. Rather than being conveyed as sustainable competences for controlling writing processes, it often seems to be the case that writing techniques are employed by tutors only as a spontaneous reaction to specific diagnosis of deficiencies.

An awareness of the limitations of peer tutoring is clearly evident in the categories. The analyzed consultation records reflected a distinctive awareness on the part of the tutors about their specific tasks, and especially about the limits of their work. Peer tutors were often bordering, however rarely overstepping, the theory-principled limits of responsibility for the peer tutoring process. For example, tutors only rarely arranged to proofread a text outside of the consultation framework or referred tutees to relevant third-party services.

Despite those limitations of peer tutoring with NNGs that the deductive analysis revealed, the inductive analysis also demonstrated its potential. The emerging categories showed that there are some principles of peer tutoring which seem to be more relevant than non-directiveness and a focus on higher order concerns. Those principles are collaboration, reflection and individuality. They are also part of our program, but have not, to date, been a primary focus of our values.

### **Collaboration**

Some outstanding features of the analysis represent cases of productive exchange between tutor and tutee. It is obviously very common in practice that a session will be just a personal and quite unstructured discussion of the tutee's text. During those discussions, both peer tutor and tutee might switch between higher and lower order concerns and the peer tutor might become more directive from time to time. Discussions seem to develop in a natural way, a way that resembles an informal talk between friends more than a serious learning situation. Those peer tutoring situations were subsumed under the category 'Collaborative Learning'.

As Kenneth Bruffee (1973, 1978, 1984, 1999) shows, collaborative learning means a sharing of authority and responsibility and a mutual learning process that benefits both peer tutor and tutee. The analysis shows that sometimes moments of personal exchange occur and establish a fruitful, productive atmosphere. Tutor and tutee are sharing a learning situation. The benefits of collaborative learning become for example evident in situations where the peer tutor comes up with ideas about how to continue to work either with a particular tutee or for herself or himself in general. For example, one tutor wrote: 'In preparation for the session, I will do some research on the theory of 'mediology', just to understand better what the tutee is talking about' (Protocol 2). Another tutor wrote: 'I too did the course X of Mrs. Y, so it was particularly interesting for me to learn something more about her [the tutee's] project on illiteracy' (Protocol 11).

With regard to peer tutor education it seems necessary to stress the collaborative aspect more. As a result of this finding we included one more question into the guidelines for writing the consultation records: 'What did I learn from the writer during this session?'

### **Reflection**

Another result is that peer tutoring with NNGs enhances the peer tutor's reflexivity *because* it is often more challenging than peer tutoring with native German writers. Peer tutors tend to be very aware of the peer tutoring process and their educational values of peer tutoring in situations with NNGs. They often find themselves explaining the writing center work in general to the NNGs. Afterwards, they question what they do and set goals for their future work. Peer tutoring NNGs thus seems to foster a practice of deep

reflection in Gibbs' (1988) sense, a reflection that results in personal action plans for the future. This deep reflection, however, seems to happen more on the side of the peer tutor and after the tutorial. Unfortunately, during the tutoring session and on the side of the NNGs, deep reflection is fostered less, often due to a focus on the current text and its improvement. Our peer tutor education therefore should put more emphasis on the value of reflection for learning. Peer tutors should be able to make this value explicit to the writers they work with and not only use it for their own learning processes. They may need to develop their knowledge of theories of reflective practice in order to engage writers in successful reflection for learning.

### ***Individuality***

The analysis furthermore revealed that peer tutoring with NNGs seems to be less predictable than peer tutoring with native writers. Peer tutors tend to deal with NNGs in a very individual way. This might be a result of feeling less prepared for this kind of work and therefore less capable to rely on a theoretical framework. However, this does not have to be a difficult experience for peer tutors. It can also be a relief for peer tutors to abandon theoretical principles internalized during peer tutor education. As Geller *et al.* (2007: 55) state, the feeling of having fixed solutions for every peer tutoring situation might lead easily to failures. Instead, they 'want tutors to see themselves, the writers with whom they work, and the complex dynamic conditions within tutorials [...] not as old problems with fixed solutions, but as moments of intrigue and as opportunities for wonderment and becoming' (Geller *et al.* 2007 :55). Peer tutoring NNGs seems to be suitable for learning to work beyond fixed solutions. For our tutor education this will lead to a stronger emphasis on the fact that every writing process and every writer is individual, e.g. through working with writing prompts based on different types of writers as researched by Ortner (2000, cf. Girgensohn 2007 and Girgensohn 2014).

### **Conclusion**

Our study took a closer look at how peer tutors in our writing center work with NNGs. It showed us that tutoring NNGs tends to reveal the limitations of peer tutoring in the sense in which our peer tutors learn about it during their peer tutor education. However, at the same time the study also revealed that working with NNGs sheds light on the potential of peer tutoring that lies beyond theoretical frameworks and fixed principles. We gained the impression that peer tutoring with NNGs showed the potential and limitations more clearly than peer tutoring with native writers because peer tutoring with NNGs in our writing center seems to be as 'problematic' as the literature suggests. This exploration of the way our peer tutors deal with NNGs therefore turned out to be a chance to question our peer tutor education and ongoing education in general and not only with regard to NNGs. The question *if* writing tutoring can be useful for language learners should therefore be converted into the progressive hypothesis of *how* non-native writing tutoring could enhance peer tutoring in writing in general. For our own writing center's future practice this means stressing theories of collaborative learning, of reflective practice and of the individuality of writing processes at least as much as non-directiveness and a focus on higher order concerns. Furthermore, we hope to encourage peer tutors to perceive peer tutoring, especially with NNGs, as opportunities for learning and for surprising moments instead of perceiving them as problematic.

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