

An ESL specialist in a composition writing center: Is experience the same as expertise?

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Abstract

Writing centers across the U.S. have experienced an influx of writers who speak English as a second language (ESL) over the last three decades, which has led to the hiring of ESL specialists as writing center tutors. Some ESL specialist have derived their specialist status from career-long experience tutoring ESL writers, not necessary from any direct training in second language acquisition or ESL teaching. This study examines the attitudes, sympathies, and practices of an ESL specialist with 30 years of tutoring experience to determine how her self-reported approach differed when working with native and non-native English writers. Her insights were subjected to discourse analysis, and results demonstrated that while her attitudes and sympathies showed deference to ESL writers, her self-reported practices were nearly identical for both groups and favored traditional writing center practices rather than recommended ESL practices. Insights from this specific case suggest that ESL tutoring experience is unlikely to be a sufficient proxy for specialized ESL training and expertise.

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Introduction

Maricel Sanchez entered my office trembling with emotion and wringing an essay draft in her hands. “I spend for six hours on this paper,” she said, her Spanish accent thickened with emotion, “The tutor she tell me nothing helpful. She no understand my writing, and she no tell me how fix my paper!” She fell silent and sobbed. This was not my first international student to report feeling out of place and unheard in a writing center tutorial. Before responding, I reflected on Maricel’s background as a non-traditional college student from Colombia and regretted the department policy requiring students to visit the writing center during their first year of studies.

I commiserated with Maricel and ultimately asked her to come by after class to discuss her writing. Maricel’s experience and her drive to learn warranted my special attention, and as I tutored her over the remainder of the semester, Maricel’s writing and self-confidence recovered and improved. Yet this collective circumstance baffled

me: given that the writing center at my institution advertised a willingness to work with ESL students, why had Maricel's experience gone so awry? I knew that writing centers were not fix-it shops for grammar errors, but I also knew that favorable ESL policies had become more common over the years.

In the 1930s, writing centers began on college campuses as peer-run tutoring facilities (a 'by-students, for-students' model) and served the typical student bodies on campus at the time: middle-class white students who spoke English natively (Lerner, 2005). For this reason, writing center theories and practices have historically embraced traditional¹ composition theories of writing and feedback.

Following World War II, international student populations at U.S. institutions increased sharply (Lerner, 2005), and by the mid-1990s, these learners were attending writing centers in increasing numbers prompting writing center practitioners to examine this new clientele (Powers, 1993; Powers & Nelson, 1995). Researchers found that ESL students behaved differently, appreciated different types of interactions, and had different expectations and needs than their native-English speaking (L1) peers (Bruce & Rafoth, 2009; Powers & Nelson, 1995; Reynolds 2009; Thonus, 2004). It therefore became apparent that applying traditional approaches to these diverse student learners was problematic. But theories and practices for working with L1 writers had long been codified, reinforced, and recreated as a dominant presence in writing centers, and an approach for working with ESL writers has yet to be similarly established. In fact, recommendations for tutoring ESL writers are largely adjustments of or reactions to traditional approaches with some practices drawn from investigations of ESL tutorial interactions (See Blau, Hall, & Sparks, 2002; Blau, Hall, Davis, & Gravitz, 2001; Cogie, 2006; Nakamaru, 2010; Powers, 1993; Powers & Nelson, 1995; Severino, 1993; Severino, 2009; Severino & Deifell, 2011; Staben & Nordhaus, 2009; Taylor, 2007; Thonus, 1998, 1999a, 2003, 2004; Weigle & Nelson, 2004; Williams, 2004). Thus, despite studies which investigate ESL writers in the writing center, ESL tutoring practices remain un-codified and not widely distributed to tutors, which means that ESL writing center attendees may experience a traditional tutoring approach, some ESL-specific tutoring practices, or an eclectic combination.

To help address the needs of ESL writers, some writing centers employ ESL writing specialists with the assumption that these tutors' knowledge of ESL writing needs can support ESL writers despite the still-nebulous theory of ESL tutoring. However, the specialists' awareness and treatment of ESL writer needs may vary by the tutors' educational background, training, and experience. For instance, an ESL specialist from Composition may use more traditional writing center practices with ESL writers than a specialist from Applied Linguistics.

One way to better understand how writing center tutors navigate traditional and ESL tutoring theories and enact tutoring practices with ESL students is through the discourse analysis of a conversation with a writing tutor specialist. Such an analysis

explores the theory-practice connection by illuminating a tutor's explicit approach while revealing implicit thinking about tutoring. The purpose of the present study, then, is to examine the discourse of an ESL specialist regarding the position she takes toward ESL writing center attendees. A forty-minute interview with Sandy Knowlesⁱⁱ, an experienced ESL writing specialist with a composition background, was analyzed using discourse analysis techniques. The analysis shows that while Sandy respects ESL writers as different from L1 writers, she appears to use similar techniques for working with both groups. This fact may explain, in part, why a student like Maricel might experience an unhelpful tutorial even in an ESL-friendly writing center.

Literature Review

Before proceeding with discourse analysis and the interview's context, a basic history of writing centers and L1/ESL tutorial research may be beneficial.

The Traditional L1 Writing Center and Philosophy

Writing centers are typically thought of as service providers in the university ecology, offering writing support and feedback to students on behalf of teachers. Instead of cultivating disciplinary theory as would a Biology or Economics department, writing centers often promote their status on university campuses by enacting a service philosophy. The conventional L1 tutoring method employed in university writing centers has historically followed a collaborative and non-directive pedagogy (Moussu, 2013). Its main goal is to enhance the writing processes of learners, in line with North's (1984) statement that writing centers should "produce better writers, not better writing" (p. 438), meaning that tutors should help writers reflect on and revise their own writing rather than interact with the text alone as a copyeditor or proofreader (Kim, 2018). Specifically, tutors are encouraged to promote learning through the Socratic Method, involving the use of open-ended or guiding questions related to student written work (Aldohon, 2021; Carstens & Rambiritch, 2021; Fitzgerald & Ianetta, 2016). Additionally, tutors are advised to prioritize addressing global issues in writing, such as focus, logic, audience awareness, and organization, rather than local concerns like unclear expressions, mechanics, or morphological and syntactic errors (Severino & Cogie, 2016; Taylor, 2007; Zhau & Hu, 2017).

Weigle and Nelson (2004) summarized work by Harris (1986) to describe their ideal writing center practice:

Traditionally, good tutoring sessions...consist of the tutors asking the writers what they want to work on, allowing the writers to explore their topics and their writing processes and coaching or probing the students for additional information (Harris, 1986). Furthermore, effective tutorials are characterized as consisting of student talk rather than tutor talk, a focus on content and organization rather than grammar, the negotiation of meaning, and tutor questions. (p. 203)

In spite of this seemingly egalitarian description, ESL writers may not respond to writing center practices in the same ways as their L1 peers, something L2 scholars have been concerned about for years (Bromley, et al., 2018; Moussu, 2013). For instance, ESL learners can struggle to understand non-directive feedback, especially when hedged with models of politeness (Thonus, 1999a). Also, ESL texts may contain lower-order grammatical issues that prevent higher-order content and organization from being addressed first (Blau et al., 2002), so traditional holistic and Socratic tutoring with these students may be ineffective (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2021; Moussu, 2013; Zhau & Hu, 2017).

ESL Writing Center Practice

This line of reasoning has not been ignored by writing tutors and their directors. Indeed, many researchers have identified ways that traditional writing center practices should differ for ESL writers. One suggestion is for tutors to act as cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic informants to ESL writers who lack native-like intuitions of the language (Blau, et al., 2001; Eckstein, 2018; Weigle & Nelson, 2004). This can extend to information about audience awareness and rhetorical expectations of the target culture in the vein of contrastive rhetoric (Severino, 1993; Staben & Nordhaus, 2009). Another suggestion is for tutors to address grammar and content issues simultaneously or in reverse order or even as an explicit writing center service for L2 writers (Blau, et al., 2002; Cogie, 2006; Liu & Harwood, 2022; Taylor, 2007). Tutors might also provide lexical instruction or feedback in addition to content and grammar feedback (Nakamaru, 2010; Severino & Deifell, 2011). And tutors should be aware that ESL writers may prefer and need explicit and direct feedback in lieu of indirect or Socratic approaches in tutoring sessions for revision to be successful (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2021; David, 2009; Williams, 2004). These recommendations are generally reactive observations of L1 tutoring approaches, thus they represent a constellation of practices rather than an ESL theory of tutoring, which is still undertheorized in the literature (Bromley et al, 2018; Salem, 2016).

Composition Tutors versus Applied Linguist Tutors

Although writing center tutors come from diverse backgrounds, their training in the writing center generally relies on composition theories (Bell, 2023). This contrasts with what ESL writers might need, which is tutoring informed by an applied linguistics and second language acquisition perspective (Moussu, 2013). Yet these two fields are largely independent of one another and stem from field-specific epistemologies (see Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Eckstein, et al., 2018; Silva & Leki, 2004). Compositionists view writing as a top-down act of discovery and social creation. They use theories of invention, genre, and audience to inform their instruction and tutoring and view problems with grammar and mechanics as interference that clouds rhetorical meaning. Applied linguists, on the other hand, view grammar as the building-blocks of communication. They approach writing as a bottom-up communicative act in which writing for them is a visual representation of sounds and words joined syntactically in sentences, paragraphs, and finally rhetorical structures; grammar errors represent

language development rather than strict interference. Arguably, any complete view of writing should incorporate both top-down and bottom-up views of language. However, both compositionists and applied linguists tend to emphasize one view over the other even in balanced approaches to teaching writing (Bell, 2023).

This philosophical divide between compositionists and applied linguists has troubled both fields for about 50 years. In his history of composition studies, Matsuda (1999) described a disciplinary division of labor that took place in the mid-1960s when composition teachers lost interest in ESL writing pedagogy and left this specialization to TESOL professionals. Other researchers have pointed out the resultant longstanding lack of communication between the fields (Leki, 2000; Matsuda, 2006; Patton, 1958). The divide, in fact, has grown so pronounced that practitioners in one field struggle to fully understand key concepts in the other (Costino & Hyon, 2011). Thonus, an applied linguist and writing center director, explained that composition specialists come from a post-modernist perspective while applied linguists are still associated with a modernist tradition (personal communication, December 4, 2012), which has led to philosophical and even methodological differences between the fields resulting in the fields essentially speaking different languages (Costino & Hyon, 2011). Table 1 summarizes the major differences between traditional and ESL writing center approaches.

Table 1
Contextualizing Writing Centers

	Traditional	ESL
Writing Center History	1890s: English composition started at Harvard; 1930s: writing centers began in peer-to-peer feedback systems	ESL writers in college increased after WWII with their 1990s surge in writing center attendance
Epistemology	Rhetoric leading to English Composition	Linguistics leading to Applied Linguistics (or TESOL)
Theory	“Better writers, not better writing” (North, 1984)	Constellation of reactions to L1 approaches
Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let students nominate topics • Encourage discussion • Use Socratic questions • Focus on organization/content above grammar/mechanics • Avoid appropriation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutors are cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic informants • Discuss grammar and content simultaneously • Provide explicit feedback • Prioritize language feedback

Since writing centers are an historic outgrowth of composition programs, they largely espouse composition perspectives of good response practices (Hobson, 2001). However, to attend to ESL writer needs, center directors may offer special ESL-focused, in-service training to their tutors or hire tutors with an applied linguistics, TESOL, or ESL writing background (see Bell, 2023; Kennell, 2019). They may also hire or designate tutors who are ESL specialists to serve ESL writers (see Cross et al., 2015). Qualifications for ESL specialists may include a *bona fide* academic degree in Linguistics or TESOL, experience working with ESL writers, or even incidental training on language acquisition or grammar.

From this paradigm ESL tutors such as Sandy Knowles have emerged. As a compositionist, Sandy was exposed to language learning theory in Spanish language classes and further developed her ESL tutoring specialization through career-long interactions with ESL writers, self-study, and intermittent in-service training on ESL writer needs, a typical path of becoming an ESL specialist tutor. The purpose of this discourse-analytic study is to investigate the position Sandy, a compositionist with no formal ESL training, takes regarding ESL writers. It is assumed her experience with ESL writers will lead to favoring certain ESL practices, but she will still reinforce many aspects of traditional writing center theory given her composition training. Although Sandy was not Maricel's tutor (though her profile is similar), it is presumed that such a mixture of practices may disenfranchise ESL writers and lead to post-tutorial reactions like Maricel's.

Focus and Method

Since compositionists and applied linguists have different epistemologies and assumptions about writing instruction (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995), this study sought to examine the tutoring approach of one ESL writing specialist, Sandy Knowles, whose background combines composition education and ESL tutoring experience. Sandy's positionality at the writing center and as a tutor is critical to understanding her discourse and is presented below.

Context and Positionalities

The Writing Center

I toured Sandy's writing center to see the tutoring process at work. Students arrive, sign in, and wait until an available tutor escorts them to a common tutoring room where undergraduate and graduate student peers conduct drop-in sessions. There is no overt attempt to match ESL writers to a specific tutor, and it is unclear how many peer tutors are multilingual or international students.

The common tutoring room contained six small tables, each with a chair for the tutor and one for the writer, resulting in 12 individuals in a single room engaging in tutoring interactions. Even though all used hushed voices, the room was noisy, and I wondered to what degree a student might hear the tutor's advice or seek clarification in such an environment.

I conversed with staff members and learned that the center employed 132 peer tutors, conducted more than 4,700 tutorials per semester, employed five professional writing specialists, and hired one ESL specialist to replace Sandy Knowles *and* another ESL specialist just prior to my interview with Sandy. The ESL specialist works with L2 students in longer tutoring sessions and provides writing workshops for ESL student writers (not necessarily for tutors). Although the ESL specialist had a private office for tutoring, Sandy did not.

Sandy Knowles

Sandy Knowles is a recently retired ESL writing specialist who worked at the center for 30 years prior to our interview. Although she worked as an ESL specialist because of her functional bilingualism in Spanish and her professional interest in L2 writing issues, her bachelor's degree was in English literature with an emphasis in composition. She was unable to teach ESL-specific classes at other universities because of a lack of formal education in applied linguistics, though informally, she viewed herself as a TESOL professional and worked with ESL students at the center for three decades without formal training.

I chose Sandy because of her seemingly typical background as a traditional composition-trained tutor who had adopted ESL sensitivity through informal means. Also, her years of experience meant that Sandy was an eye-witness to the development of ESL-based tutoring approaches that began to appear in 1993 with publications from Muriel Harris, Tony Silva, Therese Thonus, Judith Powers, and Carol Severino. In this sense, Sandy represented a bridge between a traditional, L1-focused era and a period of emerging growth in ESL tutoring practices. Her perspective, then, could provide insights into the way traditional tutors conceptualize their work after exposure to ESL tutoring theory.

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher, I hold undergraduate, master, and Ph.D. degrees in Linguistics as well as a master's degree and teaching certificate in TESOL. I also have composition teaching experience and a doctoral designated emphasis in Writing, Rhetoric, and Composition. So while I frequently teach L1 composition classes, I have a bias toward applied linguistics with language acquisition and ESL writing.

Method

Data Collection

After a few informal exchanges and a tour of her center, Sandy agreed to share her ESL tutoring beliefs and approaches with me. I composed interview questions as starting points, but the ensuing discussion was free-flowing and allowed Sandy to express her thoughts widely instead of being confined by the questions I asked. Furthermore, I sought clarifications and followed-up on unclear areas of our conversation. I recorded and transcribed our 40-minute conversation.

Figure 1

Prepared Interview Questions

1. What is your experience working with different student groups, specifically L1 and international, non-native English speakers?
 2. What is your practice and philosophy as a writing center tutor?
 3. Suppose a non-native English writer requested grammar feedback, what would you do in this situation?
 4. Does your philosophy for interacting with students change based on their language background?
 5. Does your practice or philosophy change when working with immigrant (Generation 1.5) writers?
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Analysis

I used discourse analysis to interpret Sandy's interview, evaluate her responses, and investigate how her attitude, sympathy, and practices as a tutor may have limited or expanded the agency of her tutees to obtain the help they sought. Discourse analysis investigates ways language is used to construct and maintain personal and group identities (Gee, 2005). Although used in linguistic studies (see Schiffren et al., 2001), discourse analysis is also useful in literary criticism and semiotics as an alternative to phenomenology and grounded theory to "examine how understanding is produced through a close look at...words" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373).

For my analysis, I listened to the interview several times, had it rough transcribed and annotated (see codes in Appendix) by a colleague, and reviewed the transcription repeatedly for accuracy. My colleague and I marked and discussed the categorization of multiple passages into the emergent themes of attitudes, sympathies, and practices toward ESL writers. I then more narrowly transcribed the tracer passages to investigate dynamics embedded in the discourse, morpho-syntactic, and suprasegmental levels of the interview speech.

Definitions

Attitudes

I define attitudes as internal and stable interpretations of ESL learner needs. Attitudes can be "individual-agenda or discipline-based preference[s]" (Crusan, 2010, p. 89). In other words, a tutor is likely to have a preconception of ESL writers based on his or her *personal* or *discipline-based* background. Lindsey and Crusan (2012) and Eckstein et al. (2018) show that when assessing writing, teachers have different standards for L1 and ESL writers, which may be an artifact of personal or discipline-based attitudes. Thus, when investigating a tutor's approach to L1 or ESL writers, it is imperative to also investigate his or her attitudes toward ESL writers.

Sympathy

I define sympathy as an awareness of characteristics that differentiate L1 and ESL writers. Leki explained the various shades of difference among ESL writers with Bruce's stated goal of "helping tutors see these people not as an undifferentiated group...but as individuals who, like all of us, share sets of identities" (as cited in Leki, 2009, p. 2). I operationalize sympathies as any awareness of contexts or situations that differentiate ESL writers from L1 writers or groups of ESL writers from one another.

Practices

I am particularly interested in tutor practices since these are real manifestations of both attitudes and sympathies. I therefore operationalized practices as actions an individual takes, reports taking, or considers typical of his or her actions, such as offering grammar advice or inviting a tutee for another appointment.

Results and Discussion

Sandy's Personal Tutoring Philosophy

To understand Sandy and to better situate her attitude, sympathies, and practices, I identified some background perspectives on Sandy's personal tutoring approach:

- 1 *Time 6:00 S:* I've worked with everybody that walked through the door [laughter] =
- 2 **G:** =yeah yeah=
- 3 **S:** =plus I taught composition for.. *many many* years **both** at [school] and
- 4 [going quiet] here and at several community colleges...so...[loud] *all the levels...too.*
- 5 *Time: 7:40 S:* I would ask them..if there if there's any particular thing they're concerned
- 6 about (2) a:n /whether it's a native speaker /or..an ESL student.
- 7 *Time 13:05 S:* [phrase-level falling intonation] Well first of all we say we're not an editing service\
- 8 *Time 16:00 S:* Um...and...*that* causes a meaning problem\ and *that's* the basic criterion on that
- 9 exam that they *use* is that does the grammar mistAKE...interfere with meaning (2) So, some
- 10 grammar mistakes are not that serious they're like spelling mistakes or something. [faster]
- 11 it's something they *notice* like ARTICLE mistakes /??/

Sandy establishes her authority to discuss L1 and ESL writers in a writing center context (line 1) and emphasizes her experience working outside of the writing center—specifically in traditional composition classrooms (lines 3 and 4). Her purpose in going quiet (line 4) may be a strategy to avoid bragging by downplaying her experience; however, she is confident in her experience working with all levels of students, as evidenced by an increase in amplitude and emphasis on line 4's last four words.

The use of the personal pronoun *I* in line 5 indicates it is her personal approach, which contrasts with other pronouns later in the conversation such as *we* in line 7. By clarifying her own approach, Sandy distances herself from an institutional policy, something one might expect from a tutor with ESL tutoring experience since ESL writers may need practices that contravene traditional tutoring policies (Eckstein, 2013; Moussu, 2013; Salem, 2016). Nevertheless, Sandy's personal approach corresponds with a traditional tutorial in many ways. For instance, she allows the

writer to nominate the first topic of revision (line 5), something that may help mitigate power inequities and make the writer feel more in control of the conversation. Note in line 6 that Sandy reports using this approach with both L1 and ESL writers.

Later, Sandy reveals more about her tutoring approach after I asked how she responds to writers who seek editing help. I expected Sandy to react with traditional writing practices by redirecting the request away from grammar or editing, which she does in line 7, but after acknowledging that some ESL writers have substantial language issues, she expresses lines 8 - 11. The word *that* in line 8 refers to substantial grammar errors. This response is interesting because it contains both L1 and ESL tutoring theories. For instance, in line 8, Sandy uses a traditional practice by focusing on a rhetorical convention: she describes the importance of writing to an audience, referred to as “the exam,” and suggests that writers must control their grammar to meet audience expectations (see Severino, 1993; Staben & Nordhaus, 2009). However, Sandy also uses an ESL approach by suggesting a hierarchy of errors—those which interfere with meaning and those which do not (see Lane & Lange, 2011), a common distinction drawn among applied linguists. She also insinuates that she may be willing to work with meaning-related errors, something championed by L1 and ESL tutoring theory (Blau, Hall, & Sparks 2002; Bruce & Rafoth, 2009; Cogie, 2006). Furthermore, Sandy’s confidence in distinguishing these error types demonstrates her understanding of grammar and language errors. Overall, these responses reveal that Sandy’s personal approach draws from *both* L1 and ESL practices and experiences when working with ESL writers.

Sandy’s Attitudes

As mentioned earlier, attitudes are thought of as internal and stable interpretations of learner needs, which may be individual interpretations or interpretations reinforced by one’s disciplinary background. This section examines how Sandy’s attitudes inform and shape her stated practices for working with ESL writers.

Sandy’s reaction to my question about working with students who want a line editor was to resist this request. In line 7 she does this by providing instructional correction, suggesting Sandy feels that ESL writers need meaning-based feedback instead of line editing. Three prominent features help explain the significance of Sandy’s comment that the writing center is not an editing service. The first is a phrase-level falling intonation, a pattern demarking an authority or finality to her comment: she is paralinguistically marking her comment as an assertion which she will not negotiate. However, the second feature is Sandy’s use of the pronoun “we” to recreate institutional power, which contrasts the personal pronoun *I* in line 5 used to identify her personal approach. Here, Sandy adopts a collective approach, one with which she may personally disagree at times, hence the use of *we* instead of *I*. Also note the full phrase “editing service” in line 7 might conjure a pejorative image of a fee-for-performance exchange or a type of remedial assistance in traditional writing center parlance but be seen as a neutral term in ESL theory (cf. North, 1984; Lane & Lange,

2011). Sandy subtly aligns with a traditional tutorial approach, eschewing the idea that she is paid to do whatever the writer asks. Essentially, Sandy holds an attitude of what writers need when they enter the writing center, and line editing does not address those needs.

I asked Sandy to clarify her approach by presenting a hypothetical situation of a student with numerous non-serious grammar errors. I expected her to favor a traditional approach and ignore local errors altogether or at least redirect the focus away from editing.

12 Time 17:30 S: Like are the sentences SENTences/ (2) Are they run *ons fragments comma*
 13 *splices/ THIS is not an ESL issue\.. this is a WRiting issue in general.. but it COUNTS*
 14 *against you a lot..and I talk to them about this.*

In line 12, she asserts her first step would be to look at the structure of sentences. She clearly has a command of sentence categories by listing “run ons fragments comma splices” without a single pause. This suggests that she is confident in her knowledge of English sentence structure and is aware that learners need some language instruction. But, perhaps more importantly, she again emphasizes that she would adopt this approach with *both* L1 and ESL writers because “this as a writing issue” (line 13) not strictly an editing issue. In a sense, Sandy’s attitudes show that she views ESL and L1 writers as having the same needs when it comes to meaning-related or sentence-level errors and that perhaps a single approach is sufficient for both types of learners.

15 Time 17:50 S: but..articles are *not a big DE:AL*=
 16 G: =yeah. I see what you’re saying=
 17 S: =they don’t carry much of *meaning...hardly carry any of the meaning..in English.*

Despite Sandy’s appeal to composition practices, she indicates a strong applied linguistic knowledge that English articles are function words, not content words (line 17). By stating this to an ESL writer, Sandy would likely be redirecting the conversation away from editing since this is something she does not feel writers need; yet, her understanding of the function/content distinction suggests Sandy is again implying a hierarchy of concerns. She feels that writers need a clear understanding of revision priorities. Rather than simply ignoring editing or grammar, she tries to make the most efficient use of tutoring time by ranking language concerns and further clarifying for a student the importance of their concern. In other words, Sandy’s attitude suggests that ESL writers need to be told what is and what is not important to work on.

Later, Sandy begins to indicate differences in her attitude toward ESL writers vis-à-vis L1 writers in responding to my question about how her interactions might change based on student language backgrounds.

18 Time 21:20 S:[louder] I think the [long outbreath (3)] the ESL students are SO::

19 overwhelmed when they get a paper back /with the all the grade/ stuff on it and (2) that they
 20 don't know where to start *and* it really you really need to kind of *talk* to them and *talk*
 21 about some of this stuff..that there's a hierarchy of issues here.

She gives thought to the question (line 18) and by line 20 returns to the notion of prioritizing revision and uses *hierarchy* explicitly in line 21 to reference the earlier distinction between meaning-based errors and article errors. Her comment reinforces her attitude that ESL writers need more help prioritizing revision topics than their L1 peers, who may not have article errors. So Sandy's attitude suggests that L1 and ESL writers both need traditional treatment, only ESL writers need more of it, echoing Raimes (1985, p. 250) memorable claim that L2 writers need "more of everything" including more time to read, think, draft, and revise their writing. Another difference Sandy's attitude suggests is that ESL writers may need affective support.

22 Time 21:55 S: With the *ESL* students, I think you have to do:...um maybe a lot of...more (2)
 23 working on their SELF-ESTEEM [laughter] with within all of *this*.

This is an interesting observation in that it shows Sandy may see ESL writers as emotionally resistant to adopting her revision hierarchy, and so she may feel compelled to assure them of their value despite obvious (and, from her perspective, trivial) grammar errors.

24 Time 23:50 S: It's about this:...*paper*..um (2) judged on a certain set of grading criteria\...um..but
 25 that OFTEN these. espECially the *ESL* students, have wo:nderful ideas\ They have
 26 wo:nderful...um metaphorical ways of expressing themselves that native speakers don't have\

Another poignant attitude Sandy expresses is her view that ESL writers have a different quality of ideas and expression than L1 writers as shown in line 26 where Sandy emphasizes the word *wonderful* and refers to ESL expressions as *metaphorical*. This is contrasted against her view of "native speakers" expressions, which may be inferior (line 26). Sandy's comment suggests that she does not think ESL writers necessarily need help formulating ideas. This may relate back to the issues of self-esteem in that Sandy might fixate on the positive ideas of ESL writers (something they have) as a way to bolster students' self-image (something they need).

27 Time 26:00 S: they're SU:CH hard workers, they're they're SUCH good students\.. You
 28 know they're *willing* to stay up til two or three in the morning..because it takes them twice or
 29 three or four times as long as to do the reading (2) as it does a native speaker/

A final attitude in the narrative suggests that Sandy views ESL writers, perhaps in contrast to L1 writers, as fundamentally hard workers and therefore may not need additional encouragement or motivation to study. She emphasizes and repeats the word *such* in reference to ESL students' impressive study ethics (line 27) and emphasizes the word *willing* in relation to staying up late (line 28). However, her

observation that ESL writers take a longer time to read assignments may indicate that she sees ESL learners as needing extra time to complete their work.

Overall, Sandy appears to hold a number of attitudes about learner needs. These attitudes (see Table 2) complement sympathies and precipitate behaviors that manifest themselves in approaches to tutoring ESL writers that differ from traditional approaches.

Table 2
Sandy's Attitudes toward ESL and L1 Writers

L1 Writers Needs	ESL Writers Needs
Need to focus on meaning-based grammar instead of non-serious errors	Also need to focus on meaning-based grammar instead of non-serious errors
Need to prioritize revision suggestions	May need help to prioritize revision suggestions
--	Need reassurance of their self-esteem
May need help developing ideas or creatively expressing themselves.	Do not necessarily need help developing ideas or creating metaphors for self-expression
--	Need extra time to work on assignments

Sandy's Sympathies

Sympathies, as defined earlier, refer to an awareness of what differentiates groups of writers. In this section, I describe views that Sandy Knowles expressed which indicate how she sees ESL writers as inherently different from L1 writers. If Sandy views them as two separate groups, it may be an indication that she would then tutor them differently as well.

An early sympathy Sandy expresses suggests that Sandy does not see ESL and L1 writers as different. When I asked how she would work with ESL writers who want a line editor, she responded, "We are not an editing service" (line 7), followed by an explanation:

- 30 *Time 13:10 S:* but that (2) we will help them at any level...on the you know, [faster speech]
31 helping them construct a thesis on the essay level..on the..*paragraph* level.

In this response, Sandy is not distinguishing ESL and L1 learners. Even though my question was meant to elicit her philosophy on *ESL* writers, her answer revealed a traditional approach to tutoring: she'll provide assistance on organization at the essay or paragraph level (lines 30-31) and sidestep grammar or editing altogether.

Despite the early indication that Sandy does not necessarily view ESL writers differently than L1 writers, later she does articulate some unique qualities to ESL writers.

- 32 *Time 15:20 S:* They're often have *very* good..*very* HIGH level thinking skills...in BOTH
33 languages but they *can't*..they don't have the language yet..to express it.

Sandy praises the high thinking skills of ESL writers and recognizes that ESL writers are different from L1 writers because of their language skills (line 32). Essentially she is stating that ESL writers are unique because they can think in two different languages, but are still developing skills to express those thoughts in a second language. This is the earliest instance where Sandy expresses a sympathy that ESL and L1 writers are different and comes more than two minutes after specifically asking how she works with ESL writers who want grammar feedback, suggesting that Sandy may have an initial tendency to approach ESL writers the same way she approaches L1 writers.

Another sympathy Sandy has is that ESL writers seem preoccupied with grammar errors.

34 *Time 17:45 S:* That *THEY*'re all concerned about their articles\

In line 34, the word *article* refers to English determiners, and Sandy makes the point that ESL writers may fixate on characteristics of their paper that are of little consequence—something that may distinguish them from L1 writers.

Sandy also explores how ESL writers may have different circumstances from L1 writers.

35 *Time 22:10 S:* Because when you get a..heavily marked paper *back* like that...you can jus:t feel
36 so hopeless/.. that...not only do you not where know where to START, but you just want to
37 [quiet voice] give up before you start.

38 *Time 25:20 S:* AMAZING expectations on them that none of us ever had to deal with\..You know
39 *besides* having to go home and work in the Chinese restaurant every weekend in San Jose *and*
40 translate all the welfare..paperwork and doctors STUFF for their parents. I mean..*I* didn't
41 know *anything* about this *stuff* til I was a married person [laughter] you know *and* then you
42 know not too much, maybe.. um And I wasn't trying to do it in my second language (2)So the
43 demands on these folks are TERRIBLE

44 *Time 16:15 S:* They're willing to/ do it\ because they think that's what they're here for and they
45 don't have any fu:n..[quiet voice] they don't have time to have any fun..I've met students
46 who have never been to a movie in four years. They've..just been *studying* the whole time
47 basically and that's what their..parents think they're here for and [louder voice] to get out of
48 here in four years so the next sibling can come in for /the next/ KID in college (2) You
49 know.. it's SO much pressure. [quiet voice] It's so much pressure

Sandy mentions feelings of hopelessness that these students carry with them to the writing center because of the grammar markings teachers seem to frequently make on their papers (line 36). Also, she explains the demands ESL students have on their time which can be different from L1 writers—such as working after school (line 39), fulfilling incredibly complicated translation tasks (line 40), functioning at a high level in a second language (line 42), and meeting self- or parental-expectations for quick

learning (lines 47-49). These sympathies demonstrate that Sandy is in no way blind to the fact that ESL writers come from a different background than L1 writers. A tutor whose sympathies do not indicate an awareness of ESL and L1 differences would likely enact the same tutoring practices for both groups. However, a tutor, like Sandy, who does seem to have an understanding of the different groups may be more likely to tutor these groups differently.

Sandy's Practices

The assumption is that Sandy, as a composition-trained writing tutor, would favor a composition approach to tutoring ESL writers. So far, this analysis has shown that Sandy's attitude toward ESL writers' needs is slightly different than her attitudes toward L1 writers' needs. Furthermore, her sympathies toward ESL writers indicate that she indeed sees ESL writers as juggling different linguistic and familial demands when compared with their L1 counterparts. Both facts suggest that Sandy may adopt different practices for ESL writers based on her attitudes and sympathies. However, in the description of her practices, Sandy seems to overwhelmingly adopt composition practices as seen in lines 50-53 where she intentionally delays any grammar discussions with ESL or L1 writers until after issues of topic are addressed.

- 50 *Time 8:12 S:* I'm usually reading for *everything* anyway: (2) because..as I say, if I get to the
 51 end of the introduction, and I see that they're off topic..there's absolutely no point in doing
 52 grammar (2) until they get on the topic..til they're answering the question. And /that
 53 happens\ [long outbreak (3)] ah with native speakers, /too\
 54 *Time 17:10 S:* [phrase-level falling intonation] Yeah and I would do other kids of *grammar* first
 55 too..that that..ESL students and and native speakers have in COMMON.

Furthermore, once she does discuss grammar (lines 54-55), Sandy intentionally addresses grammar issues that are likely to affect both ESL and L1 writers such as meaning-based and sentence structure errors—something that both compositionists and applied linguists do. It should be noted, though, that tutors with linguistic training may be more prepared to offer intricate explanations to clarify meaning-based and sentence-structure errors.

Even while discussing topic and grammar, Sandy maintains a traditional composition perspective on tutoring: feedback should be used to address audience concerns.

- 56 *Time 19:35 S:* *Drive* it home to them that it's not some stupid thing that English teachers are
 57 trying to *shove* down their throat, but it's not important like Biology (4) [faster] There's a lot
 58 of people here [normal speed] /?/ the biosci and chem fo:lks you know that's because that's
 59 the kind of place [it] is=
 60 **G:** =*sure*=
 61 **S:** =and um..*some* of them you have to try and convince that this isn't just a
 62 conspiracy among English teachers but..it's about clearly communicating your ideas to
 63 somebody who's reading this [laughter]=
 64 **G:** = *sure* =

65 S: = whatever the class is..and [slower] so far we have not talked about *any*
 66 ESL (3) I would say this to ANYBODY...that had this issue.

Sandy reinforces the idea that writers should not be writing solely to make their English teacher happy (lines 56-57), but that writing is about “communicating your ideas to somebody who’s reading this” (lines 62-63), Sandy’s recommendation for any writer, L1 or ESL (lines 65-66). Focusing on audience awareness aligns more with composition than applied linguistics.

Sandy also seems to use praise and emotional support equally with students.

67 Time 23:00 S: I think students that you need to talk to students about their ideas and the wo:rth.
 68 of their ideas\...and that this:: kind of...heavily marked paper doesn’t mean that they’re (2)
 69 a..BAD person or a..*defi:cient*..person or a *bad* student it’s not about them.
 70 Time 26:40 S: So if you can find something *goo:d* to say about the pa:per I would really always
 71 start there. [phrase-level rising intonation] I’d *start there* with a native speaker too, but I
 72 think it’s..a little more obvious you know because */they’ve heard this stuff before*. This is not
 73 their first paper conference in their life...*pro:bably* you know.

In lines 67-69, Sandy states the importance of building students’ self-image, and she fails to distinguish ESL and L1 writers in the description of her practice. She points out that she does not hold a deficiency view of ESL writers by emphasizing that students are not deficient even when they have heavily marked papers (line 69). Similarly, in line 70 Sandy comments that students should be praised if possible, and she clarifies that this is not just for ESL writers (line 71), though she seems to be more explicit with her praise for ESL writers. While praise and emotional support are not necessarily composition-specific tutoring practices, Sandy’s praise of *ideas* (line 68) is a holistic (composition) approach to tutoring, not a language-specific one.

At nearly the very end of the conversation, Sandy makes a comment that appeared to demonstrate a departure from composition tutoring:

74 Time 27:50 S: But..you know..if we need to STOP in the middle of analyzing a paragraph and
 75 *do*: a little lesson on the present perfect [quiet voice] well that’s what you do.

In lines 74-75, she remarks that sometimes it is necessary to stop and “do a little lesson on the present perfect.” Such grammar instruction is certainly not editing, but it may not be aligned with prototypical composition tutoring either. Teaching a miniature lesson on a complicated verb form is much more typical of an applied linguistic approach to tutoring. Sandy does not seem to distinguish whether she would limit this kind of instruction to ESL writers or would include L1 writers as well. Nevertheless, it appears that despite her tendency to use traditional composition practices, she is nonetheless willing to adopt ESL practices in some cases.

Conclusion

My interview with Sandy explored her self-described tutoring approach and ways that it changed based on the language background of those she tutored. Although the attitudes and sympathies described by Sandy Knowles suggested that she viewed ESL writers as different from their L1 peers, her reported practice for approaching L1 and ESL writers was largely the same for both groups, and she seemed to favor traditional tutoring approaches.


The fact that her reported approaches for both groups were quite similar, despite 30 years of experience working with ESL writers and deferential attitudes and sympathies toward them, suggests that even ESL writing center specialists may struggle to address the needs of ESL writers. In Sandy's case, her status as an ESL specialist was conferred based on her experience working with multilingual writers rather than from dedicated study of ESL writing development, ESL pedagogy, or theories of second language acquisition. A possible conclusion to draw then, is that experience does not necessarily substitute for expertise in ESL writing center tutoring. Instead, a combination of both experience and study may be needed to adequately support ESL writers. Otherwise, tutors who are trained in a composition background may be unable to systematically change their tutoring practices to account for ESL writer needs. Moreover, a foundational understanding of the needs and linguistic challenges associated with writing in a second language may be the key to a general ESL tutoring approach, and a combination of experience and dedicated study of second language acquisition and learner needs may further be required to translate published recommendations for working with ESL writers into fully developed approaches and ultimately theories of ESL tutoring.

This explanation appears to square with Maricel Sanchez' situation in the introduction of this paper. Maricel's experience at a traditional (but self-described ESL-friendly) writing center ended in frustration ostensibly because the tutor and writer did not understand one another. Obviously there may be other explanations and reasons for Maricel's frustration, and part of the situation may have been exacerbated by unrealistic expectations of what could be accomplished in a writing center tutorial or official policies restricting what a tutor could help with in a tutorial. For these reason, further research should be conducted to hear the stories of unsuccessful ESL tutorials. In understanding the mismatches, inconsistencies, and contradictions that ESL writers and their tutors feel when a tutorial fails, researchers and practitioners will be better able to see the kind of expertise needed to serve members of this population effectively.

Since the discourse analysis in this paper comes from self-reflections of a single ESL tutor, it is impossible to generalize observations to all ESL tutoring specialists. Furthermore, Sandy's interview, juxtaposed with Maricel's experience, is merely a proxy for a single ESL tutorial. In reality, Sandy was not Maricel's tutor; therefore, more research is needed on actual ESL tutoring dyads and across many contexts before

generalized observations can be made. In the meantime, the discourse analysis in this study reflects a single example of how experience with ESL writers in a writing center may affect attitudes and sympathies but does not necessarily substitute for differential practices when working with ESL writers.

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Appendix

Transcription Codes

<i>italics</i>	emphatic stress
CAPS	very emphatic stress
.	sentence-final falling intonation
,	clause-final intonation
/	rising intonation (not necessarily a “question”)
\	falling intonation
!	animated tone (i.e. exclamation)
:	held or lengthened vowel
::	long hold or lengthening of vowel
..	perceptible pause of less than 1/2 second
...	a pause of 1/2 second
(2)	pause of 1 second or more is put in parenthesis (i.e. 2 seconds)
/?/	inaudible utterance (couldn't hear well enough to transcribe)
/sun/	a word between slashes indicates uncertain transcription
//	double slashes between words or within a word indicate that another speaker overlapped; the double slashes is placed where the overlap begins and ends for the speakers if the overlap is within either speaker's utterance
=	when one speaker follows on another speaker immediately with no break at all
[]	Supratextual noise or sound, such as reaction from audience

ⁱ “Traditional” describes the dominant approach to English composition that traces back to Harvard College in the 1800s, when Harvard president, Charles Eliot, identified a “literacy crisis” among students entering his university (Spear, 1997, p. 319). In 1872, Harvard taught the first composition course and instructed students in the use of English, their mother tongue (Spear, 1997). Most colleges and universities in the United States have adopted the Harvard system of requiring a first-year composition course, though traditional versions generally assume that students have native fluency in English. Thus “traditional” in this paper refers to dominant, historical composition practices designed for native-English speakers.

ⁱⁱ Sandy Knowles is a pseudonym.