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ABSTRACT

A discussion of communication between native English-speaking (NS) tutors and their non-native-speaker (NNS) students draws on a study conducted in the Indiana University writing center and focuses on conflicts between effectiveness in communication and effectiveness in instruction technique. Examples of tutor-student (NS-NNS) interaction are drawn from a corpus of 34 writing tutorials, with students of varied language backgrounds, between 1992 and 1996. Tutors were six male and five female graduate students from various departments. Analysis of the tutorial sessions looks at questioning strategies, balance of interlocutor participation, comprehensibility of the interactions, coherence, and politeness. It is concluded that conflicts between effectiveness, comprehensibility, and politeness are common, and writing tutors find themselves involved in trade-offs between communicative and social goals in order to perform their tasks effectively. Tutors face a triple-bind: what they believe to be effective tutoring may not be comprehensible, but what they believe to be comprehensible may be neither polite nor good tutorial practice, and what they believe to be polite and effective practice with native speakers may miss the mark entirely with non-native speakers. Necessary compromises place the tutor-student contract of collaboration in jeopardy. (Contains 22 references). (MSE)

How to Communicate Politely and Be a Tutor, Too: NS-NNS Interaction and Writing Center Practice

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In this presentation I'll touch on three research areas that do not often overlap: interaction in second language acquisition, pragmatics in institutional discourse, and tutor training and practice. Looking at a number of academic writing tutorials, I'll show how tutors deal with the following dilemmas: (1) What is effective tutoring may not be comprehensible, and (2) What is comprehensible may be neither polite nor good tutorial practice.

The data examined here (see table) are selected from a corpus of 34 writing tutorials taped at the Indiana University Writing Tutorial Services between 1992 and 1996. The tutors were six male and five female graduate students from various Indiana University departments. Students were classified as NS or NNS of English and by gender; their native languages included Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Malay. Most of the students were undergraduates, but some NNSs were graduate students, marked here by asterisks. The last column in the table shows the student paper content area. While the Writing Tutorial Services attempted to match tutor major area with student paper content area, institutional constraints often prevented this from happening.

Tutorial Practice

Let's begin with the first tutorial goal: Be a good tutor. Here's an excerpt from the tutors' training manual, the Indiana University *Writing Tutorial Services Guide to Tutoring:*

> *It is important that you COACH and not fix....*Coaching is more demanding of all concerned. Tutors must keep silent when they are bursting to tell students how to approach an issue or solve a problem. Students learn more when they shoulder more of the responsibility for their educations. To accomplish this, use the Socratic method by asking thoughtful, challenging, and polite questions....Nudge, don't push---let the student do most of the work. (*WTS Guide to Tutoring,* pp. 2-3).

This text epitomizes effective tutorial practice:

- Attend to the writer's concerns.
- Ask lots of questions.
- Be a good listener.
- Do not dominate the interaction.

Drawn from a multitude of sources, these tutorial heuristics have coalesced into a sort of "writing center lore" passed on from tutor to tutor. Whether these practices are effective with NNS tutees remains to be seen, and this study

is based on the conviction that until such interactions have been thoroughly described, analyzed, and contrasted with NS-NS tutorials, no principled recommendations regarding tutorial training and practice are possible.

Let's begin with the first imperative, attending to the writer's concerns. In this excerpt, the tutor elicits the student's sentence-level concerns but is far more interested in content and organization. She tries to remedy the matter by suggesting the student get someone else to do the job:

T: ....Go ahead. **What sorts of things do you want me to look for? You, you said grammar [issues**
S: **[Grammar (.) grammar and conclusion and um (.) citation.**
T: uh-huh
And the citing that you [use, the citations that you use? O.K. (.)
S: [yeah
I'm not sure they're correct or not....

[7 turns]

T: ....O.K. (.) So I'll read through, and **I'll look for um some sentence-level concerns....**

[96 turns]

T: ....**Now what we haven't addressed is any of the sentence-level stuff.** We've been, we've addressed your argument all along. (.) Do you have someone that can
S: uh-huh
T: read through this? Do you have a friend that can read this, once you've made all your changes?
S: Do I have a friend who can read?
T: Who can read this (.)

S: Oh, yeah. What do you mean?
T: Well, someone who can read through and say, "This sentence doesn't make sense to me. What do you mean here?"
S: Oh, O.K.
T: O.K.? **Because what we didn't get a chance to address was any sentence-level concerns...**

(Tutor 7 with NNSM, Turns 1-2; 9; 105-108)

There are many other such inattentions to student concerns throughout these tutorials. Although tutors are not conforming to their training, they believe the input they give students may, in fact, be precisely what students need to produce successful writing.

In encouraging tutees to take responsibility for their own work, tutors are admonished, "Ask lots of questions." Good tutorial practice favors open (*wh-*) questions asking for "real" information (Harris, 1986). Bell (1989) demonstrated that tutors instead typically choose rhetorical, closed (*yes/no*), probe-and-prompt, or leading questions. In these data, such questions occur in tutorials with NSs but more often in those with NNSs:

T: ...Oh, O.K. I mean **I guess one question we could ask is "What causes ozone loss?" Do we know what causes um ozone loss?**
S: uh-huh
Yeah, I think it's some kind of spraying and and pollution or something like that?
T: O.K. so we have sprays, (.) pollution. (4s) **Does car exhaust?**
S: Car, yeah, it does.
T: Car exhaust. (.) O.K. Um (.) well then the question would be (5s) **how much of this, of these items are being produced or used or whatever, here in Bloomington, right?**
S: uh-huh
Yeah, um I mean the cars, because they use everything almost.
T: Is used. O.K. so now are you supposed to, I'll ask another question, **are you**
S: yeah
T: **supposed to be talking about the effects of ozone loss or the causes of ozone loss?**
S: Both um the causes and um ---?----.
T: o.k.
O.K. so um first thing we might want to think of is finding a list or looking up a list of causes (.) **right?** So if you could come up with a specific list of um you
S: yeah
T: know what kind of sprays, what kind of pollution, what kind of car exhaust, and how much each of these damages the ozone, **right?**
S: uh-huh...

(Tutor 5 with NNSF, Turns 4-8)

Note the closed yes/no questions such as *Do we know what causes um ozone loss?* and the tagged rhetorical questions, ending in *right?* Even the *wh*-question is framed as a hypothetical (*I guess one question we could ask is "What causes ozone loss?"*). *Are you supposed to be talking about the effects of ozone loss or the causes of ozone loss?* exemplifies one form Bell did not list, the alternate question made up of two conjuncts joined by *or*. By employing *or* questions, the tutor limits the options of the student interlocutor even further:

S: That's kind of a musical term.
T: **Do you say "by third" or "by thirds"?**
S: By, by, wait.
T: **By the third or by?**
S: By thirds, yeah, that's right...

[24 turns]

T: ...**Is it, it like a summary, or is it really a summary?** "The coda, staring at measure 208, summarizes the development in the way that the section itself is shortened."
S: Oh, O.K., so it's kind of redundant?
T: **Well, if it's like a summary, or is it a summary?**
S: (5s) Maybe I should say that coda started at measure 208 is shortened...

(Tutor 1 with NNSF, Turns 30-32; 56-58)

In some alternate questions, the second conjunct is missing:

T: O.K. That's the type of conclusion that you wrote originally? This type of
S: um
T: conclusion is what you thought of originally?
S: Uh-huh.
T: O.K. Um, how do you feel about that now? **Do you, do you still want to include some elements of the summary with your new [direction here or?**
S: [Yeah.
Yeah, I think.
T: O.K. How do you want to do that?
S: Um let me see...

(Tutor 4 with NNSM, Turns 37-39)

By omitting it, the tutor offers no alternative, and the locution becomes as closed as a yes/no question. Although asking alternate questions may advance the cause of comprehensibility, it's easy to see how by doing so the tutor dominates the interaction and risks appearing rude.

When "open" *wh*-questions appear in NNS tutorials in this sample, they may advance neither good tutoring practice nor politeness. In this excerpt, the tutor's question *What's the adjective form of durability?* assumes NS competence on the part of her tutee:

T: O.K. you can just turn this into an adjective. **What's the adjective form of "durability"?** (3s)
S: It looks like the same as noun?
T: Hmm? **What's the adjective form of "durability"?** (3s)
S: I don't know.
T: Sure you do! Here, this is what makes it into a noun, all this
S: hmm Durable?
T: "Durable," right...

(Tutor 8 with NNSM, Turns 89-92)

These data support the characterization of institutional discourse as a series of question/answer adjacency pairs in which the institutional representative is the questioner, controlling both topic and interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Questioning illustrated in these excerpts approximates interrogation; it deviates from the Socratic method as it leaves little opportunity for student answers.

Another heuristic, "Be a good listener," could also be translated "Do not dominate the interaction." When I first began looking at these tutorials, I noticed that tutors talked a lot, interrupted a lot, and gave a lot of advice they weren't asked to give (Thonus, 1995b). In a paper presented at this conference two years ago (Thonus 1996a), I reported that it didn't seem to make any difference whether the tutor and the tutee were the same or different genders, or whether the tutor was an expert in the content area of the student's paper or not. If one talks like a tutor, interrupts like a tutor, and suggests like a tutor, one is a tutor. In other words, the institutional role of the tutor (Thonus, 1995a) guarantees that the "Be a good listener" and "Do not dominate the interaction" aspects of good tutorial practice are consistently ignored. Time prevents me from showing you any specific examples; you'll notice some of the features I've mentioned in other excerpts throughout the talk.

Comprehensibility

NSs have been found to modify discourse features of their speech to enhance comprehensibility when interacting with NNSs. Ellis (1986) argued that the NSs' goal is to "negotiate meaning," eluding conversational trouble and repairing trouble when it does arise. Techniques such as topic-initiating moves, questions as comprehension checks and clarification requests, as well as repetition, expansion, and restatement (Long, 1983a, b) may enhance comprehensibility but are costly to the institutional discourse ecology (Agar, 1985). Therefore, comprehensibility may interfere with good tutoring practice.

In these data, tutors attempted to enhance comprehensibility by using these conversational moves:

- Treat topics briefly.
- Repeat others' utterances.
- Confirm own comprehension.
- Check the NNS' comprehension.

By "treating topics briefly," the NS seeks to reduce the conversational burden on the NNS and on self (Long, 1983b, Smith et al., 1987). In this excerpt, the tutor is winding up a tutorial with a NNS whose paper explains and exemplifies the phrase *to run amok*:

T: So maybe if you could, that's all, I mean now I can't really ((laughter)) think of anything else to say. Um (.) Does this happen a lot?
S: I mean, yeah, if you hurt someone when amok, everybody will try to rescue, try to rescue their life.
T: O.K. (.) Mmm. **(8s)**
S: ((Laughter))
T: What?
S: I thought that this one [was enough for a conclusion. [Well, I have two sentences,
T: [((laughter)) **[I mean, if you think, if you [think that's enough, then, then it should be.**
S: [that's right
Well, I'll think about it.
T: So I wouldn't worry about it. **It seems to me that you've certainly done the assignment, done everything you're supposed to do, so I think it's not that big of a deal. O.K.?** I need to make a copy of this. **Is there anything else (.)**
S: yeah
T: **that you want to talk about?**
S: Mmm

T: Let's look at this list. I think we talked about yeah, yeah, I think
S: thirteen
T: we've (.) covered all this stuff...

(Tutor 3 with NNSM, Turns 66-70)

The tutor simultaneously changes the subject from the student's too-short conclusion and maintains the floor by uttering a voiced pause (*Mmm*) followed by 8 seconds of silence for "information fetching" (Obeng, 1992). Then she appeals to the student's authority over the text *(I mean, if you think, if you think that's enough, then, then it should be)*, allays his fears (*It seems to me that you've certainly done the assignment*), and finally asks a topic-changing question (*Is there anything else that you want to talk about?*). These actions would be construed as poor tutorial practice if applied to a NS tutorial.

Other modifications common to these interactions are "Repeat other's utterances" and "Confirm own comprehension." This excerpt exemplifies both techniques:

S: ...So I chose "Lady" um "The Confession of Lady Nijo" and um do you want to know the story?
T: Sure, can you give me a quick synopsis?
S: all right
Yeah, O.K. um(.) O.K. This is the **bio-, kind of bio-, bio- um (.)**
T: **Biography?**
S: Right! **Biography**, right. And then the author um so it's about O.K. four hundred years ago, and she was in court, I mean, do you know the **court** system in Japan?
T: **Court?**
S: **Yeah, yeah, court**. So um he, O.K. she when she get fourteen years old, she, the emperor wanted to her as a concubine, but she doesn't know, she didn't know it at that time, and she um actually raped by him, but she, she became one of his wife, con-, concubine. And then, and she faces a lot of difficulty when she was
T: uh-huh
S: working as a wife. And then so she has um um love affair with other, she learn a lot of things and like um (.) I think actually she has two other lovers, and at that time um to have um relationship with others except a husband, that's very common things, so ((sigh)) at end um end of the story she became **nun, nun?**
T: uh-huh
A nun.
S: **Nun?** But it, over there in Japan at that, at that time um um I think you think nuns just stay in church and just pray, and no, there's sexual relationship with others, but I think over there in Japan possible...

(Tutor 2 with NNSF, Turns 3-7)

Repeating *biography*, *court*, and *nun* simultaneously confirmed the tutor's comprehension and endorsed the tutee's use of the terms.

Finally, tutors will "check the NNS's comprehension." In this excerpt, the tutor uses *yes/no* and tag questions to check the student's understanding of the expression *so to speak*:

T: Um (.) to, I think what you would say right here would be "to think about this problem." **Or else "to understand this problem," maybe? [Is that what it is to**
S: [mmm, What kind of (.)
T: **really know what it means?** Yeah, the word would be "understand."
S: uh-huh, yeah
"To understand deeply"?
T: Um you could say "deeply," but just "understand" [implies that, so just take the, and
S: [uh-huh, o.k.
T: yeah, "to understand this problem, it is necessary to understand the important fields in the ---?--- department," um (.) "so to speak," **do you mean "for this purpose" (.) here?**
S: Pardon?
T: "So to speak" is an idiomatic expression, um and it doesn't mean "in order to do this." It seems like here you're using it to introduce um, (.) **you're saying it "to speak in this manner," (.) right?**
S: I mean um to repeat my point.
T: **Right. That isn't what that expression means.** "So to speak" means um
S: oh
T: "in a manner of speaking:" It, it's it sort of is an introduction to an idiomatic expression...

(Tutor 6 with NNSM, Turns 25-28)

At last the tutor is convinced that the student's interpretation is incorrect and moves to correct it with the categorical statement, *That isn't what that expression means*.

As we've seen, tutor modifications in NNS tutorials may increase comprehensibility but don't guarantee it. Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1996) found that language proficiency interacting with institutional status limited comprehensibility, in that the turns of the institutional representative serve neither as models nor as input for learner acquisition of NS pragmatics. This insight has repercussions for tutorial practice, particularly because tutors and faculty instructors expect their students' speaking and writing to improve as a result of their tutorial participation.

Politeness

In Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) work on politeness, everyone has a face, and that face can be threatened by *face threatening acts* (FTAs). The severity of face threat a speech act poses depends on the power balance between speaker and hearer, the social distance between them, and the degree to which the FTA is rated as an imposition. Depending on these factors, the speaker will decide how to encode a speech act, either by

- Opting out, that is, not performing the FTA.
- Performing it off-record.
- Performing it with redressive action, using positive or negative politeness strategies.
- Performing it on-record (baldly).

Let's look at a hypothetical situation in a writing tutorial. A tutor may want to direct a student to revise her paper. His first instinct, if he is following his tutorial training, should be to opt out, but tutors being tutors, instead he decides to tell her off the record: *This paper needs some revising*. Or he may decide to redress the suggestion by encoding it as a question (*Could you revise this paper?*) or a 2p modal (*You could revise this paper*) or a 1p modal (*I/we might revise this paper*). To redress it further, he may mitigate it: (*Well, I'm not sure, but you might just consider revising this paper a tiny bit*). Finally, if the status balance (or imbalance) is just right, he offers the suggestion bald-on-record: *Revise this paper*.

In the context of institutional discourse, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990, 1993) identified noncongruent speech acts as "those that do not conform with the established roles and status of the participants" (1993, p. 231). In order to preserve status, speakers may observe the Maxim of Congruence:

> Make your contribution congruent with your status. If congruence is not possible, mitigate noncongruence by employing a status-preserving strategy (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, p. 477).

In an earlier study of NS and NNS tutorials (Thonus, 1995b), I found that tutors offered more suggestions to NNS tutees and used more mitigation with NSs. I intuited that tutors were more likely to view NSs in a relationship of equals and were less likely to "pull rank" on them than

with their NNS tutees. In these data, we find additional support for a hypothesis of differential politeness in NS and NNS tutorials. We also find tutors juggling politeness with comprehensibility and effective practice.

At this juncture let's return to an excerpt we looked at earlier. Here, the tutor offers a suggestion politely encoded as an interrogative (*Do you have someone that can read through this?*), but the NNS tutee does not interpret it as such:

T: ....Now what we haven't addressed is any of the sentence-level stuff. We've been, we've addressed your argument all along. (.) **Do you have someone that**
S: uh-huh
T: **can read through this?** Do you have a friend that can read this, once you've made all your changes?
S: **Do I have a friend who can read?**
T: Who can read this (.)
S: Oh, yeah (.) **What do you mean?**
T: Well, someone who can read through and say, "This sentence doesn't make sense to me. What do you mean here?"
S: Oh, O.K.

(Tutor 7 with NNSM, Turns 105-108)

The tutor's annoyance at the communication breakdown is understandable: She tried to be both polite and efficient but failed. This negotiation used up three conversational turns, far too much of the precious institutional time allotment. By being less polite and more direct (that is, more comprehensible) and thus not being a very good tutor, she might have resorted to a "bald-on-record" suggestion. In these examples, a tutor offers such suggestions to his tutees. In the first excerpt, the student is a NS; in the second, she is a NNS:

T: ... *I think that's a very good move on your part*, and this sentence um actually does sort of move into a more persuasive, a sort of, what's the use of this knowledge, "the way G.E. managers play these different roles should be used as an example to other managers and employees." I think that's a really good sentence for you to move from explanation to analysis, and I, *I think you've done a pretty good job at setting up the bigger concerns of the paper in that way.* (.) *O.K.?*
S: Do I need to put that in that one paragraph where I explain the three roles?
T: Up here? It might not be a bad idea um to say, near the
S: uh-huh
T: beginning, I'll write that down as a possibility. (7s) Um (12s) O.K. that's paragraph two. In your second paragraph *you might anticipate that there are two*
S: o.k.

T: *sections to your paper.* **Set it up.** First, after discussing the three roles, we'll talk, it becomes clear or something, *I'm not exactly sure how to word it*, but somehow say that you're going to do some sort of analysis of what are these roles. *O.K.?*
S: uh-huh
T: *I think that's a really good idea, too...*

(Tutor 1 with NSF, Turns 18-19)

T: ...Um another thing I was going to point out is, that when you use these um parentheses like this, you need to put a space after the word before, so it's easier to see.
S: But, um but, the last part, I don't know if whether it makes sense or not [because
T: [What, this right here? *That's not right, you know.* **Fix it.**
S: yeah "The tonic between C major sections." It's kind of
T: Inside them? Or or (.) alternatively alternatively, O.K.
S: Yeah, like C major, C minor, C major, C minor, you know (.)
T: Oh...

(Tutor 1 with NNSF, Turns 49-50)

In both cases, the tutor offered bald-on-record suggestions encoded as imperatives. The NS tutee, however, received the suggestion preceded by compliments (*I think that's a very good move on your part*), by suggestions coded as less threatening 2p modals (*You might anticipate that there are two sections to your paper*), by mitigating question tags (*O.K.?*), and by expressions of uncertainty (*I'm not exactly sure how to word it*). The NNS tutee received the suggestion without such polite accouterments. In fact, the imperative *Fix it* is preceded by an evaluation, *That's not right, you know*. Despite the mitigation *you know*, the evaluation contains no hint of a compliment.

We might hypothesize that "impolite" imperatives are more comprehensible to NNSs than other less direct and more mitigated tutor suggestions, but their production may be attributed instead to a broader pragmatic reality. Young (1992) concluded that the NNSs in her sample of tutorials preferred to receive imperatives not because they were more comprehensible but because they matched the deference or positive politeness pragmatics of their native culture. The NNS students expected their tutors to be authoritative institutional representatives, not equals as the tutorial goal of collaboration insinuates. Their idea of institutional roles clashed with that of

their tutors, who were trying to juggle effectiveness, comprehensibility, and politeness while maintaining solidarity through negative politeness strategies.

Conclusion

Conflicts between effectiveness, comprehensibility, and politeness are not unusual in institutional settings. In the sociolinguistics literature, Aronsson and Satterlund-Larsson (1987) demonstrated that physicians' attempts at politeness led to patient misunderstanding and misdiagnoses. Charlotte Linde's (1988) studies of "black box" tapes retrieved from aviation accidents concluded that politeness at the expense of comprehensibility might be deadly. In the ESL classroom, Verplaetse (1996) noted that NS teachers modified their speech in a manner that perhaps facilitated comprehensibility but limited NNSs' access to interaction.

Writing tutors find themselves involved in tradeoffs between communicative and social goals in order to perform their tasks effectively. They face a triple bind: What they believe to be effective tutoring may not be comprehensible, what they believe to be comprehensible may be neither polite nor good tutorial practice, and what they believe to be polite and effective practice with NS tutees may miss the mark altogether with NNSs. The compromises tutors must make among these conflicting communicative goals place the tutor-student contract of collaboration in jeopardy.

TUTOR	GENDER	TUTOR MAJOR AREA	STUDENT	STUDENT PAPER CONTENT AREA
1	M	English	NSF	Business
1			NSM	Business
1			NNSF	Music
2	M	English	NSF	Biology
2			NSM	English (Composition)
2			NNSF*	Japanese Literature
2			NNSM	English (Composition)
3	F		NSF	Anthropology
3		English	NSM	Biology
3			NNSM	English (Composition)
4	F	Linguistics	NSF	English (Composition)
4			NSM	English (Composition)
4			NNSM*	Education
5	M	English	NSF	Biology
5			NNSF	English (Prof. Writing)
6	F		NSF	Telecommunications
6		History	NSM	History
6			NNSM*	Education
7	F	History	NSF	Political Science
7			NSM	Anthropology
7			NNSF	Sociology
7			NNSM	History
8	F	English	NSF	Comparative Literature
8			NSM	English (Composition)
8			NNSF*	Education
8			NNSM*	Library Science
9	M	English	NSF	English (Literature)
9			NSM	Speech
10	M	Hist/Phil. Science	NSF	Sociology
10			NSM	English (Composition)
11	M	English	NSF	English (Composition)
11			NSM	Business
11			NNSF*	Journalism
11			NNSM	Business

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