Tutors or Teachers: Taking an Instructive Role in the Communication Center

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The influx of English as a Second Language (ESL) students has not gone unnoticed in the communication center community, as evinced by the increase of research and theory regarding how we—as tutors, coaches, consultants—approach sessions with these students. Often we are instructed by directors, tutoring handbooks, and other tutors to approach these sessions as you would any other: sit side by side, read the paper aloud, and emphasize higher-order concerns (HOCs), steering these students away from the lower-order concerns (LOCs) such as grammar or spelling. While many ESL students do want to discuss organization, structure, or thesis statements, some need language instruction and guidance at a sentence level before they can consider composing a complete paper. Additionally, ESL students sometimes do not know how to explain exactly what type of communication assistance they need; "the term 'Grammar' often functions as a catch-all for any sentence-level, editing, or language concerns in ELL [English Language Learner] writing" (Cheatle, 2017, p. 27). Because language acquisition is expedited by the universities or language institutions, ESL students are assumed to have the basic sentence structure capability in English, regardless of their primary language's varying syntax.

When we remain in our communication center bubble, we do not always witness the extent of the pressure placed on ESL students to compose in the same style as native English speaking (NES) students. Sharon Myers (quoted by Cheatle, 2017) discusses the various frustrations ESL students experience:

> Unrealistic expectations about language learning embedded in our institutional arrangements for ESL students; the historic deemphasis of sentence pedagogies; a conception of culture which excludes the structures of language;[…] and the failure to recognize the depth of "sentence-level" problems involved in second-language processing.

As communication center tutors, we are in a unique position to build ESL students' understanding of sentence-level variations between their primary language and English. Through conversation and observation during a session, we can establish a sense of syntactical difference and work to explain why these differences matter in academic communication. Having reasonable cognizance of the rules that dictate Standard Academic English (SAE) allows writers to "recognize, define, understand, and expand the linguistic choices they are making" (Newman, 2017, p. 5). By instructing and giving students access to full comprehension of these conventions, we help foster the ability to make deliberate linguistic and rhetorical choices.

A core reason that these "error" patterns appear in ESL communication is that students receive limited and intensified language instruction that skims over the base level knowledge necessary for constructing fully developed papers in English. Additionally, students learn vocabulary through lists meant for memorization and practice; Google translate and bilingual

dictionaries; and conversations, both observed and participated in. However, this separation of grammar and vocabulary instruction limits ESL students' comprehension of the rules dictating the English language because they cannot discuss in full their communication decisions. Errors are often rooted in this inadequate vocabulary instruction, and so ESL students may supplement their language use with more direct translations. For example, consider the word "assist":

Language	Word
English	Assist
Spanish	Asistir
Dutch	Assisteren
French	Assister
Swedish	Assistera
Croatian	Asistirati

Using a similar spelling based on the form and pronunciation of a given word would be a logical translingual error. Having a basic knowledge or even a reference book for the etymology of English words can help us better explain why these errors occur and how to avoid them in the future.

A second pattern that emerges from this style of English learning is the substitution of words with similar definitions but different cultural connotations. One of the things students learn in English courses, ESL or otherwise, is to use varied vocabulary to keep the paper unrepetitive. The instances Min (2016, p. 22) uses demonstrate the use of "made of," "consists of" and "comprised of":

- "The management team consists with John, Mary, and Benjamin."
- "The United Nations is made up with more than 200 individual nations."
- "The human body comprises of billions of tiny cells"

The above example shows that direct translation without a developed vocabulary, and understanding of that vocabulary, leads to the confusion of similar terms as ESL students use them interchangeably. While discussing these LOCs during a session may feel like we're submitting to the role of editor, we are taking on the role of a teacher, one with time to invest in the students' education on an individual level. As Min (2016) states, "By combining instruction in grammar with vocabulary, tutors can more effectively guide students to learn how semantically similar words have different syntactic and pragmatic usages" (p. 22). By taking the time to work with ESL students on sentence level issues, we are furthering their ability to write more developed papers with correct word usage.

Coupled with this vocabulary deficiency is the combination of words that tends to be marked as awkward phrasing. Words that are typically used together are called collocations, and they come in many forms, including noun-verb, adjective-noun, and verb-adverb. Take the verb "wave" for example; if someone is waving with great effort, we say that they "wave frantically." Any other adverb with the same meaning wouldn't sound natural to a NES student. Similarly, we tend to describe coffee as either strong or weak because powerful or puny don't naturally roll off the tongue. In fact, collocations "comprise at least 20 percent of written language discourse" (Yoon, 2016, p. 42-43). As tutors, there is less we can do to explain why these associations exist, but we can give students a list and discuss the collocations that appear in their primary languages.

As we work with ESL writers who are continually acquiring new knowledge about how the English language works, we should remember the difficulties of learning a new language, especially to academic proficiency. Rather than pointing to errors as

an editor would and telling them how to fix a sentence, we should encourage ESL students and take the time to explain the grammatical and syntactical differences between English and their primary languages. We as communication center tutors can provide individualized attention that ESL students often cannot receive elsewhere. In essence, we can fortify their base knowledge and foster their abilities to write fully formed papers that are not devalued due to lower-order concerns that impact the larger aspects of an essay.

References

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