

Armies of two: Effective one-to-one writing tutorials

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how instructors work with students one-to-one to get the most out of tutoring sessions for academic writing skills. Tutoring or ‘conferencing’ is a common component of academic writing and research courses however because teachers work in isolation, there is often little guidance or input on how exactly to develop writing skills through personal meetings. Combining an overview of relevant results from recent publications and primary research, this essay examines the approaches and methods that have been seen as successful in writing tutorials by eight English teachers working on EAP in Macau (south China). The investigation covers giving feedback without mystifying or discouraging students, tactics accessible to writing teachers, addressing both higher-order and lower-order text problems and bilingualism. The findings show a diversity of priorities and approaches along with a broadly felt sense of the importance of teacher-student rapport and shared development when conferencing.

1. Introduction

English teachers work incrementally, attempting build learners skills bit by bit. It is axiomatic to English Language Teaching (ELT) that instructors rarely get to see the long-term result of their work: a confident, proficient English user. Yet academic writing tutors are often expected to help still developing L2 writers to produce competent texts that would meet the standards of academic discourse. Intensive academic writing instruction is a common task for English teachers in tertiary and related contexts. In all higher education, students need to write and in ELT academic writing training is often the crowning part of the curriculum. Teachers may be under institutional pressure to help students develop rapidly. Gatekeeping tests such as IELTS can take on massive importance, while capstone projects such as an English medium thesis or research report can serve as arbiters not just of language ability but of scholarship skills.

To bridge the gap between the demands of academic writing and learner’s current skill levels, one common technique is ‘conferencing’ or tutoring students on their texts one-to-one. Compared with other aspects of ELT, there is surprisingly little research work on academic writing conferencing techniques. Eckstein looks at the philosophy involved (2012) and effectiveness across student levels (2013), while Lillus and Swann (2003) examine the efficacy of conferencing feedback and Thonus (2002) attempts to define tutorial success. Teacher-student interaction in one-to-one tutorials has been analyzed from a discourse analysis perspective (Thonus, 1999) but there is not so much focus on the concrete process of what actually happens in a one-to-one tutorial from the teacher’s perspective. Feedback forms and techniques have been extensively and deeply researched (e.g. Hyland 2006, Ferris 2003a) but focus on what ELT writing tutors actually DO during the conferencing process is minimal. McAndrew & Reigstad, (2001) attempt to link theory, research and chalkface practice but they are an exception in a body of literature that often doesn’t fully appreciate the conference tutor experience.

Meanwhile many TESOL instructors recognize the need for individual, face-to-face meetings with student writers to focus on their evolving texts, and give personal feedback. However, tutors may struggle to find effective approaches that help students to develop their writing in the short and long-term. The immediate task of helping to develop the text in

question can eclipse the real goal of teaching writing as a skill and developing language and cognitive abilities in the long-term by promoting learning through writing. Commercially or institutionally published ‘how-to’ conferencing manuals (e.g. Goeller and Kalteissen, 2008) are top down in design and situation specific thus often inappropriate in scope for ELT writing tutoring.

Teacher perspectives on the conferencing process are worth focusing on specifically even in a student-centred, collaborative learning environment because it is the tutor who controls the agenda by and large during most writing conferences and the tutor roles (advisor, assessor, informant etc.) tend to dominate the writing conference dynamics. The freedom the conferencing format offers tutors in terms of timing, selection of materials, feedback techniques and bonding with students is offset by the unspecified expectations of the tutorial experience, compared with a conventional class. This research seeks to investigate conferencing techniques in teaching EAP writing in order to identify effective techniques, defined as successful learner development, in the same way that classroom ‘best practices’ are acknowledged in teacher development programs. An assumption of variation and ‘informed eclecticism’ on the part of teachers makes this research descriptive rather than proscriptive or driven by a single pedagogical theory.

1.1 Definition of terms

For this research the terms *conferencing* and *tutoring* are used interchangeably to refer to one-to-one writing tutorials with ELT students. The term *conferencing* may be confusing or unfamiliar so a generally accepted definition (from Richards & Schmidt, 2002) is worth providing:

conference *n* **conferencing** *v*

in teaching, a semi-structured face-to-face conversation between a teacher and a student or a small group of students in which work being undertaken is discussed ...The teacher gives feedback on progress, suggested improvement etc. (p.105)

A distinction is sometimes made in the literature (e.g. Thonus, 2002) between teacher-student *conferences* and peer-to-peer *tutorials* where the tutor is a more senior student who has no role in the setting of assignments or assessment. For this study that separation is flouted and the two terms are used synonymously. The research aim is to elicit and compare tutor techniques in the conferencing process and see what benefits result, academically and otherwise, so a wide-based research field is advantageous.

2. Literature Review

Writing is generally perceived as a solitary activity and academic writing is used so often in tertiary education because it is the learner’s individual chance to show what they know on paper. However at the heart of conferencing (in and outside of ELT), is the philosophy that two heads produce a better text than one. As Canagarajah (2002, p.206) puts it “Writing is a social action.” “One cannot learn to write by oneself.” In talking about writing, the student writer is initiated into the target discourse community of the text by the tutor, who is (presumably) already a member. Text production involves ‘inner talk’ and conferencing with a tutor “...mobilizes talk to improve writing competencies” (McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001, p.4). Conferencing dialogue with the tutor activates the scholarship schema of the student as well as develops their text (Canagarajah, 2002). One-to-one meetings enable the tutor to personalise or expand on their written feedback and afford the learner the opportunity to argue back (Canagarajah, 2002).

The lecturer “office-hour” for individual consultations on writing and research is a long established university tradition. Zamel (1985) was a pioneer in including conferencing

in the ELT toolbox. She is critical overall of teacher's work with student texts because of teacher inconsistency and a lack of appreciation for writing as process. The first and most obvious of four key dichotomies regarding conferencing emerge here: *process writing* versus *product approach*. Is the purpose of a conference to enable students to master "the composing processes writers make use of in writing" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.422) or to work towards the emulation of a typical text in the desired genre? And where does language (systems) learning come in? This debate is primarily philosophical but it informs tutoring technique in that the tutors chose to prioritize the text at hand or the student's learning and development as a user of the writing process. In conferences, product-based approaches tend to predominate initially because tutorials are by nature focused on academic texts-in-progress. The target discourse community has set expectations and the tutors is expected to aid (or scaffold) the students actualization of that academic text type (Hyland, 2003). There is a shift towards process as texts develop and learners need to extend themselves beyond their current linguistic and skill levels to service the needs of the text. Goldstein and Conrad (1990) researched writing conferences with ELLs and found varying degrees of success in the negotiation of meaning process partly but not directly related to student conference participation. Learners tended to get out of conferences what they put into them.

Research into effectiveness in writing tutoring is split between holistic work on writing tutoring (including the development of L1 English writers adapting to academic discourse) where L2 English writers (ELLs) are a side concern and ELT-based academic writing tutoring. In the former category researched based around university "writing centres" is particularly revealing (Babcock & Thonus, 2012, Babcock et. al. 2012). This dichotomy between conferencing as a prescribed part of a course (mandatory, scheduled, potentially linked to assessment) and writing centre tutorials (voluntary, sometimes ad hoc, not directly tied to grading) is useful because it relates to the institutional structure for conferencing and dictates the inclusion of ELT into the writing centre tutor's work (not a specialized role done by an outsider). Babcock's work in surveying and synthesizing writing centre research focuses mainly on EMI institutions where L2 (ESL) writers are not the majority. This research is informative but there are sufficient differences between the student populations for a separate enquiry into tutoring dynamics in EFL contexts such as Asia. This division of conferencing into 'inclusionist' and ELT-specific is dictated by context and exists primarily in the approach and view-point of the tutor.

The third dichotomy is about the nature of feedback tutors give on written texts. Feedback is a term that covers all manner of sins. The most comprehensive survey in this area is from Burke and Pieterick (2010) who take an inclusionist view of the literature rather than segregate ELT concerns. The two broadest characterizations of feedback are the emergence of *prescriptive feedback* (the tutor acts as a teacher/editor) and *reactive feedback* (the tutor reacts as a generic reader). The former tends to include both 'lower order concerns' such as grammatical accuracy and word-choice and 'higher order concerns' such as text-organisation, while the latter focuses on feedback on text meaning, content, ideas and high-order organisation of the writing. Leki (1990) has characterized the writing tutor's role as "schizophrenic" (p.59) because of this split between the simultaneous roles of readers, advisor and assessor, particularly in contexts where the conference tutor may also be grading the text at some point. English teachers are often drawn away from the content and ideas in the texts by the gravitational pull of lower-order concerns with accuracy because they feel language focus is their job (Leki, 1990).

Tutor's roles and related feedback aims as they relate to conferencing are differentiated on the kline below (based on Burke and Pieterick, 2010):

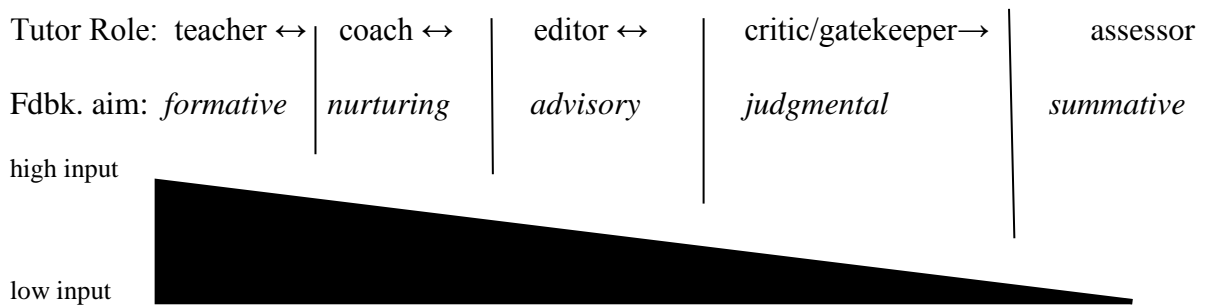


Figure 1. Tutor roles and feedback aims

These classifications of tutor are instructive rather than absolute, implying that tutors will assume different roles at different times during a writing conference. The only universal seems to be opportunity to follow Ferris and Hedgecock's (1998) advice (as cited in Canagarajah, 2002) to personalize teaching strategies to learning styles and needs within the conferencing format. The role, feedback nature and level of input vary but also combine to determine the specific feedback type and tutoring techniques employed. The threshold decision is how much time tutors spend concentrating on problems with language accuracy and what exactly the learner is expected do about them.

This opens up the forth dichotomy, directiveness or *text-ownership*. The literature (as summarized in Ferris 2003b) tends to characterize L2 writers as more receptive to tutor suggestions and less tolerant of non-directive tutorial input than English L1 tutees. Leki (1990) claims that a more prescriptive approach may be needed with L2 writers because they have less of a resource base to work with when writing rhetorically in English. She further argues that an assessor/tutor can justify a degree of 'text appropriation' since they are informers regarding evaluation criteria and as tutors they desire the student's text to be a success. Tutors working in English with both L1 and L2 writers had observably different input styles according to Thonus (1999). Are ELT writing tutors generally comfortable in that 'dominant' role? It is common sense to suggest that writing tutors wish to avoid the tedious role of proofreaders and this is policy in many writing centres (Babcock and Thonus, 2012) but where on the directive – non-directive input gradient can they be most productive working with learner draft texts? Most tutors accept the role of genre/text-type informants for learner academic writers. However there is debate about combining academic genre exposition with language work as advocated by Hyland (2003) or taking a non-directive approach (e.g. Sang-Keun, 2008), with the latter being more popular currently. One thing that overarches this division is the common practice of tutors and learners forming "a relationship of collaboration on a common project" (Canagarajah, 2002 p.199) so regardless of the level of tutor input in the final text it is a collaborative effort undertaken with some 'esprit de-corps'.

The last concern pertaining to this study is one where the literature in only minimally informative. What is the role of bilingualism and code switching in writing conferences. In contexts where many English tutors speak the learner's L1 this is relevant, especially when the purpose of a conference is often on the border-line between language teaching and academic skills development. In any text feedback there tends to be a trade-off between specificity and comprehensibility in teacher feedback. If using the L1 is arguably helpful to the tutor (and thereby the learner) what is the contention? Research into code switching the Hong Kong context noted that learners often switch to their L1 to better express meaning

(Carless, 2007). The argument for the use of L1 at times is bolstered by the lived experience of competent L2 users as code-switchers. The English-only prescription common in ELT and EAP classrooms is artificial and arguably unhelpful in a conferencing situation.

3. Methodology

This project follows in the qualitative tradition of *grounded theory*, where practice is critically investigated and theoretical principles are then extrapolated from reported practices. The obvious research tool for this project was interviews. Personal interviews with working teaching who use conferencing techniques in their writing teaching would allow the researchers to peer behind the curtain of writing tutorials as insider spectators without the obtrusiveness that would inevitably result from direct observation of one-to-one tutorials. The interviews aimed at allowing the participants to discuss their experiences and approaches holistically and amalgamate their expertise while leaving space for narrative input.

A semi-structured approach was necessary because the researchers wanted to get as much relevant information as possible from the interviewees. The target was rich data. In total of 23 questions with additional optional follow up questions were finalized (Appendix A) for possible use in the interview phase. From this set, a majority would be selected during each interview for a target interview time of 30 minutes. A lee-way of 10 minutes in either direction was agreed as permissible. While the investigator was giving direction to the interview through the selection and ordering of questions, the interviewees were controlling the interview as a whole by expanding on or summarizing aspects they selected. The door to ‘narrative inquiry’ (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014) was left open but the summative impressions of the interviewees formed the bulk of the data. The interview questions and process was piloted on a colleague of the researchers and refined to be more elucidative. To verify and illuminate the interview data, the researchers aimed at active “checking” during the interviews and reflection during the data analysis.

The participants were chosen according to the principle of *purposeful selection* (Light, 1990, as cited in Maxwell, 2013) which is to say they were not chosen randomly or for the researchers’ convenience. The selection aimed at accessing a diversity of tutors using conferencing in a variety of tertiary EAP related teaching situations in the Macau context. A range of training backgrounds and experience levels was sought as well as a mixture of bi-lingual (English – Cantonese) and non-Cantonese speaking teachers to allow exploration of the effect of bilingual tutoring.

In an attempt to achieve more broad-based results within the Macau context, the researchers sought writing tutors from equivalent tertiary institutions in the area as well as teachers working in high-schools and private tutorial centres. The researchers’ own institution has embarked on a thesis project for all fourth-year students, which involves mandatory one-on-one writing conferences with both English teachers and content area specialists (this research only interviewed the former) who ultimately assess the final text. Counterparts at other institutions used conferencing as part of their EAP teaching (assessment involved) or worked in an institutional writing centre (no assessment role). One instructor focused of test-preparation with academic writing as part of IELTS training (external assessment criteria are relevant to feedback but no grading is involved). The majority of learners the teachers in this study tutor have an educational background strongly influenced by Confucianism which is sometimes characterised as teacher dominant.

Characteristics of the interviewees are summarised on Table 1:

Table 1. Overview of interviewees

| Interviewee initial | Tutoring context | ELT training (Y/N) | EAP teaching experience (Y/N) | Cantonese Speaker (Y/N) | Gender |
|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--------|
| MU | Tertiary, Thesis course | Y | Y | N | F |
| W | Tertiary, Thesis course | Y | Y | Y | M |
| R | Tertiary, Thesis course | Y | Y | N | F |
| MM | Tertiary, writing centre | Y | Y | Y | F |
| C | Tertiary, writing centre | N | N | N | F |
| L | Tertiary, writing centre | N | N | Y | F |
| MC | Private tutorial institute | Y | Y | N | M |
| V | Secondary school | Y | Y | Y | F |

The audio files of the interviews were then cross-transcribed (each researcher transcribing the interviews conduct by the other) and double checked, with both researchers listening to all the interviews while reading the transcripts to ensure accuracy. The transcription conventions were standardized previously (based on Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). An exception being the interview with MU, which was conducted with both researchers so the transcriber was also a co-interviewer. Prior to the coding process the researchers short-listed possible broad ‘themes’ expected from the data based on the literature and the researchers own knowledge and experience. Topics from the question set thus formed an initial set of deductive categories. Then the interview transcripts were analyzed and manually coded for emergent themes using margin notes (mostly added post-transcription) and colour coding of the transcripts. This was done in two stages (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Each researcher coded the interviews separately and then the results of this coding were matched to see the amount of overlap. The inductive categories were later compared with the predicted themes and commonalities were identified to the broad groupings of: *teaching approaches*, *writer autonomy* or *text-ownership*, *bilingual tutoring* and *teacher standards/priorities*. Computer analysis (i.e. NVivo) was rejected as the researchers saw no need to complexify the process.

4. Findings

Four predominant themes emerged from the interviews: a diversity of tutoring approaches (the initial focus of the study), some differences in standards or ‘priorities’ among tutors (including tutors with similar teaching contexts), awareness of student autonomy or *text ownership* in feedback for text development and bilingualism as a tutoring strategy. Another observation is the rather obvious but nonetheless significant emergence of agreement among the interviewees that rapport is an absolutely necessary foundation for successful writing tutoring.

4.1 Tutoring approaches

Teachers are notoriously idiosyncratic. Interviewing eight teachers and expecting them to unanimously agree about practices is unrealistic. A further level of diversity is added by the closed-door aspects of conferencing as compared to classroom practice and the opportunity one-to-one teaching naturally affords for individualized instruction. Nonetheless two commonalities came out of the interviews. First all interviewees combined written and

oral feedback in some form. Additionally, discovery learning of both writing micro-skills and grammar form was a common thread in relation to writing conferences as “teaching events”.

In relation to written and oral feedback, tutors felt they were stronger (in terms of promoting learning) when combined than separately. The conferencing discussion supported the written feedback facilitating both tutor and learner understanding for both higher order concerns related to text meaning and lower order concerns focused on local errors. MU saw it as a unitary process.

“My written feedback is very thorough. I try to make it clear but be thorough. (When conferencing) I try to pull out what they are trying to say... I can't separate my conferencing from my written feedback.”

Working in a writing centre context, interviewee L. attempts both actions simultaneously:

“I will start from the first paragraph and try to decipher what they are trying to say and fix their grammar (with written feedback) as they go along.”

The common practice of correction codes was used by W. to promote learning form and focus revisions. This was reinforced with oral feedback on the text's target revisions during conferences.

“It's easier for them to remember and identify the problems, especially when we use a lot of symbols to mark their writing... and the consultation reminds them that these symbols are there for your use.”

MC, who teaches as private tutor preparing learners for IELTS, uses a more free-form style of correction focusing on the location of errors combined with oral input on grammar and the use of a specific structure to meet the needs of the text:

“When there's a paper I sort of circle it like editing... With that we would then take a sentence structure and then refer back to that and say right, when talking about this (use) the passive voice for example.”

In the multiplicity of feedback techniques interviewees discussed, the two key foci were the level of grammar focused, accuracy-based feedback required and the role oral input (as opposed to written feedback) in text revision. Spoken interaction was sometimes characterized (e.g. by MU) as ephemeral feedback for lower level learners (this is consistent with Ferris and Hedgecok 1998, as cited in Ferris 2003b) without written support while others saw the learning and text improvement resulting from the interplay of oral feedback and written annotations (like W.) as not being level specific.

The role of discovery learning (as opposed to direct input) in a writing conference was important to most interviewees. The common feeling was that the tutor's role is to help the student learn to be a better writer and English user rather than to simply improve a specific text. MM summarizes:

“My job is to make sure learning happens”

W. sees conferencing as a platform for discovery learning:

“I'm an advocate of oral feedback...(it's) conducive to learning not only to their writing.”

MM and MC expressed jubilation at the perceived moment of learning during a conference.

“When in discussion, I don't have to tell them things because they figure it out for themselves, that's really exciting.” – MM

“When you're working tirelessly to try and get them to see... a certain... mistake they're making. They don't understand it, they don't understand it. I'm getting frustrated: What way

can I get them to understand? And when it finally happens it's relief for me like "Whew, I've done it." and so now it's relief for them because now they can actually do it properly. So...yeah. That's the joy." – MC

The most common feedback technique used among interviewees was also the most common participation prompting tactic: eliciting. Tutors using questions is a common-sense approach and MM sums up the advantages by saying:

"The way that I guide them is to ask them questions. Anything I'm not clear about I ask them Wh- questions. I can't say I don't give feedback directly but I start with questions to see if students can generate parts of the answer."

This links to McAndrew & Reigstad's idea of tutor talk as a mechanism to help learner improve as writer and Canagarajah's claim that tutor talk is initiation in the academic discourse community. In order to have those advantages, the tutor needs to talk. Most of the tutors seemed comfortable with a high level of teacher talking time in tutorials (MU and L. guessed their TTT to be at least 60% for example) and did not feel this made the conferencing experience less collaborative or harmfully teacher-dominant. When asked to quantify a target level of teacher talking-time (TTT) or student talking-time (STT) [q. 11] most respondents gave some variation on *"It depends on the student."* [Interviewee C]. The predominant teacher perception being that stronger students have the potential to contribute more orally to conferences than weaker students. C, working in a drop-in writing centre, explains:

"If it's like a business student where they don't use English as much, it's more tutor talking...but if it's an English translation (major) student we try to get them to talk more."

4.2 Text standards and tutor priorities

The broad variation in techniques interviewees discussed was belied by a general wave of agreement on text priorities in the writing tutorial: communicating meaning clearly is more important than grammatical flawlessness. The higher-order concerns of comprehensible content and clear self-expression by-and-large surpassed grammatical accuracy as an area for obligatory tutor feedback. As MU expresses it:

"...we're trying to produce a logical piece of writing, not a perfect piece of writing."

This sentiment is echoed by C:

"It don't think it (language accuracy) is as important, it's definitely important to mention it, but it's not as important (in a text) as (text) form and structure and logic."

For L. the role of tutor is that of reader:

"I categories grammar as like the lower order concern. So, sentence structure and like verb tenses and articles and so mechanical and technical stuff of English. Because I have found that...if I continue reading the whole page, paper or essay, with all their grammar (mistakes), I can't understand their organisation or what they are trying to say their higher order. I am concern of that part."

MM, working in a writing centre that discourages intensive correction of local text errors draws the distinction between text development and learning opportunities related to grammar errors:

"If we point out all the errors I don't think much learning will happen, they will just correct it and go home."

W., who works extensively on accuracy focused revision in drafts, saw error correction as being in service to the clarity of the text as whole, part of communication and text-effectiveness:

“The purpose is improving the text not using language (accurately)”

Only interviewee R. bucked the ‘message over accuracy’ trend, seeing a density of grammar errors as damaging the overall coherence of a learner text:

“When the grammar is incorrect, it affects all the other factors”

This benchmark effect is reflected in the IELTS marking bands and is therefore of concern to tutor MC who worries about the calibration of his feedback as “the voice of institutional authority” (Canagarajah, 2002, p.197) and the effect of that feedback on learner morale:

“... am I giving them false hope because I’ve got the grading? Or am I grading it too low because I’m scared of grading too high and then they’ll think “Why aren’t I improving enough?” so...”

Yet MC also shares the group’s prioritization of text- structure and organisation over local or even global grammatical and lexical errors.

“Yes. Well that actually is getting them to think of the plan. Right, what are you going to do? How are you going to form this?... because that’s the hardest part. They’re not actually taught that in schools. And half of actually the grades they were getting wasn’t actually to do with their level of English. It was how they formatted and planned it”

4.3 Feedback and text-ownership

Concern about tutor appropriation of the final text as a result of feedback and the conferencing process were, surprising and in contrast with the literature (e.g. Leki, 1990), was not a major worry to the interviewees. The teacher role of informant about the academic discourse community rooted in genre-based writing pedagogy (Hyland, 2003) was by and large accepted.

An exception was L.

(How much ownership do you feel students have of the final version of the text?) [q.16]
“That’s a question I ask myself every time I finish with the student!”

Other (generally more trained and experienced) tutors were for the most part indifferent to the potentially appropriationist results of tutor over-influence in their writing conference work because, as MC puts it, *“With the writing, they have to come up with the ideas”*.

This is further developed by R. who sees student originality as something teachers do not take sufficiently into account.

“Sometimes I get amazed by the ideas the students have... We should not underestimate them (students) because they have a lot of ideas in mind.”

A split emerges in the eyes of the tutors between learner-writers who abdicate dominance of their texts, either because of perceived linguistic weaknesses (consistent with Ferris 2003b) or Asian cultural expectations, and learners who participate more fully in the conferencing process as the practice of text exploration by two equals (a common assumption in writing centre-literature e.g. Goeller & Kalteissen, 2008). MU notes “(I like it when)

students suggest things I didn't even notice." and MM nicely encapsulates the group feeling when she says:

"My biggest joy is when the student argues back... then I feel like I'm really engaging with a writer."

4.4 Bilingualism

All of the bilingual tutors used L1 to some extent in their tutoring, for rapport building if nothing else. Even teachers who are not Cantonese speakers noted the learning advantages of using L1 during the conference process. As non-bilingual tutor MC says: *"There's absolute, definite benefits there."*

A distinction can be drawn between use of conferencing as a language learning exercise and the writing conference a text development meeting. In the latter case, L1 is a fair means to discuss the student's ideas. L1 has obvious advantages to the learner's affect. As L. notes:

"By them being able to speak Cantonese, they kind of... don't have to be as nervous or anxious getting their ideas across."

MM echoes this by noting the learner's sense of relief when they can use Cantonese with her. This kind of code-switching practice flies in the face of a lot of standard TEFL procedures but is a reality in a south China teaching context. Some interviewees mentioned respecting institutional rules about the use of L1 (W, MM) while others expressed a level of bilingualism envy (MC, R) with respect to conducting writing conferences.

4.5 Rapport

Lastly, and not unexpectedly, when asked about tutor-learner rapport [q.8] in the writing conference process, all teachers saw the establishment of a good inter-personal relationship as the cornerstone of conferencing.

MC (working as a test-preparation tutor with teenagers) elaborates:

"I think building rapport is, for me, key to get them to... open up, not feel embarrassed, not be shy of mistakes. It's a lot easier with one-to-one. In class they feel embarrassed but also with one-to-one, if you don't have the rapport they may not take on your advice."

MU gives rapport pride of place in the conferencing process because of the emotional aspects of a high-stakes writing project:

"Rapport is very important. Honestly in conferencing, I'm concerned as much if not more with rapport as with what's going on in the conference. My role is to encourage them....I've had students cry (about their thesis)"

L. – tutoring in a drop-in style writing centre – is more measured in her assessment:

"I don't think it is absolutely necessary, but I think it is beneficial to have rapport with a student so that they will keep coming back to Writing Clinic or to your office hours to get help. But, if it is just like, this kind, like the writing clinic situations where you just walk in, then I think rapport is not that important. We will have to form a really quick one, like on the spot. But, to develop a longer, like from, just one time, I think it is important, for the long run."

Consistent with Babcock's (2012) findings but in a different context, a partial distinction can be noted in the tenor of the rapport, with writing centre tutors who have no role in student assessment feeling freer to mix with learner-writers than teachers who are conferencing with students whose work they will later assess.

As writing centre tutor C notes:

“When they’re here and they get this one on one session they feel more encouraged...this come back to the rapport and us (tutors) being that friendly face on campus...they (students) don’t feel there is going to be a grade at the end of this”

Overall, tutor-learner rapport was seen as key to the success of conferencing. Good rapport is the mechanism that allows tutors to switch between roles and access multiple feedback aims in the tutorial, whether or not they are also assessors. Rapport building is cure for Leki’s (1990) tutor schizophrenia, allowing tutors to be both advisors and assessor. Moreover rapport was seen as a necessary pre-condition for learning in a one-to-one tutorial.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out what English teachers tend to do during writing conferences. In summary, the variety of practices and techniques defies easy classification into patterns of practice. Some general themes do present themselves: tutors value text content, logic and rhetorical effectiveness over grammatical and lexical accuracy. Errors are seen as teaching opportunities which lend themselves to a discovery learning approach in the one-to-one format. Simultaneously, direct input on text-type expectations and discourse style was perceived as part of the tutor’s role. Feedback techniques are not consistent at all (echoing Zamel, 1985) and bilingualism is an accepted tutoring tool. The emotional and interpersonal sides of conferencing make rapport building a necessary keystone in this kind of tutoring.

5.1 Limitations

The most obvious shortcoming to this project is that only teachers were interviewed. To fully examine conferencing it would be better to contrast the views of tutors with those of learners, however the researcher’s limited resources made that impractical. Secondly, the interviewees are all based in the same city and share a basis for their work so commonalities are to be expected. To extend the validity of any findings a more broadly-based teaching population would need to be similarly researched. Lastly the target number of interviewees (eight) was small and a larger group would have naturally provided richer data.

6. Conclusion

Bilingual teaching gets ugly step-sister treatment in mainstream ELT but respondents, including non-Cantonese speakers, were generally positive about it. The focus was communication of meaning over the accuracy of form in the text (mirroring the priorities of the teacher-reader) and rapport building advantages are to be found in dual language one-to-one tutoring. The English-only expectation of many teachers and institutions is therefore open to question.

Rapport is the key to conferencing according to both common sense and the respondents in this research. Tutors and students become an ‘army of two’, battling to improve the learner text on both the high-order level of discourse and lower-order level of accuracy. The tradition of ELT is to use writing to develop grammatical and lexical accuracy but the conferencing tutor is working on the level of the whole text, incorporating syntax and moving beyond it to genre. Writing may be solitary but learning to write is partially social (Canagarajah, 2002) so the conferencing format is not just effective but necessary.

Finally, standardization is overrated. Tutor inconsistency is the price to pay for the personalization of teaching and learning that the conference format allows. At the supra-institutional level, there is no real need for regularity and predictability in teaching tactics. There was no expectation to find universal techniques so there is no sorrow at their absence.

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Appendix A – Interview questions

- 1 How often do you meet one-to-one w/ sts. to talk about their writing?
- 2 Who do you meet with, all sts. or a selection? Which sts. come to writing conferences?
- 3 What do you focus on when you meet?
- 4 How long do you meet for each time?
- 5 Why exactly do you feel it's beneficial for sts. and t.s to meet one-to-one?
- 6 Generally speaking, How do you give fdbk.in a writing conference? To what extent do you focus on errors in form? Do you think it's worthwhile to work on every single error?
- 7 What do you and your students do to prepare for a face-to-face meeting about a student text, generally speaking?
- 8 How important is rapport in effective writing conferencing?
- 9 How often do you refer to assessment or external feedback criteria during writing conferences?
- 10 What do you think is the ideal balance between classroom input and conferencing in a writing course: 80% classes 20% meetings, 50/50 or more time spent on conferences than on input?
- 11 During a writing conference, how much time (as a percentage) is teacher/ student talking time?
- 12 What aspects of student writing do you think are best addressed in a conference format?
- 13 What strategies do you use to get sts. to fully participate in a writing conference?
- 14 What would you say is the biggest joy/frustration in holding writing conferences?
- 15 During a writing conference, how often do sts. interrupt you to express their own voice? Why do you think that is?
- 16 One thing we're researching is the concept of text ownership. How much ownership do you feel the sts. have of the final version of their text?
- 17 During a writing conference how often do you use L1? What difference does that make? Do you switch back & forth between languages?
- 18 During a writing conference what do you do if you feel sts. don't understand your feedback? – What do the sts. do in this situation?
- 19 Have you ever experienced a writing tutorial as a language student/ been trained?
- 20 What are some possible motivations for sts. in attending writing conferences? What are sts. most interested in?
- 21 How do you think sts. (especially weaker sts.) are impacted by writing conferences/ tutorial in the short and long term?
- 22 How do student texts improve as a result of the conferencing process?
- 23 How does this kind of tutoring affect sts. long-term development?