

**Rethinking Grammar Instruction: Empowering Tutors to More
Comprehensively Address Tutees' Needs and Concerns**

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The author discusses the need to re-focus attention on grammar instruction as a way to empower tutors to manage tensions that often arise when students argue for attention to local concerns over global concerns. With reference to her qualitative research regarding tutor apprehensions about providing grammar instruction, the author argues many constituencies need to be educated about the importance of grammar instruction, and that tutors should be provided with the skills and vocabulary to talk with authority about such instruction as a means to eliminate barriers in the tutoring process.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a student in possession of an essay must be in want of grammar instruction. Comments about the importance of proofreading abound on papers and in student conferences with instructors.

Granted, good grammar is an important facet of good communication, but the
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focus on grammar often approaches obsessive proportions. Similarly, students who come to writing centers, both native-English speakers (NES) and non-native-English speakers (NNES), often insist that grammar is their *real* problem—despite their lack of a solid thesis and/or appropriately developed and supported ideas.

An immediate tension exists between students seeking help for writing projects and the tutors who are attempting to help them. Based on their training, tutors in writing centers try to decentralize and even marginalize grammar, making it last in the topics addressed during tutoring sessions—if it is addressed at all. This approach often creates frustration for those students we want to serve, and in some cases means those students may not continue to seek our help. I argue that we have two important reasons for re-focusing attention on grammar instruction. First, the historic approach for tutoring students has been to focus *last* on grammatical and mechanical issues, an approach that marginalizes the concerns of many students. Second, a common philosophy for tutoring is to keep the session in the hands of the student seeking help (e.g., ask questions and guide, but do not tell students what to do). By refusing to address grammar concerns early in the process, we create a process that encourages students to seek help elsewhere. However, addressing grammar concerns earlier and more often also means we must train or retrain tutors to do this work—work that many tutors are uncomfortable doing and, equally important, untrained to do well.

Background

As the result of recent discussions and workshop sessions with tutors in the center I direct about problems with “tutoring grammar,” I began to reconsider some of my own early writing center research, specifically a qualitative study asking questions about why tutors avoided working NNEs. The study was small, but had some useful results. In that study, I hypothesized that the tutors’ reluctance (sometimes their overt resistance) to working with NNEs was the result of a cultural bias. However, I discovered that tutors actually avoided working with NNEs because they, the tutors, could not explain grammar mistakes by citing the actual rules of grammar—something that NNEs demanded because it was how they had been taught and thereby *understood* English. The tutors felt like frauds; as new graduate students in an English M.A. degree program, they believed they were deficient because they could not cite grammar rules. They merely *knew* by instinct when a grammar or mechanical mistake was present. Consequently, these tutors’ self-esteem sank, and they averted this feeling of failure by evading the students they were supposed to help.

Overview of My Early Study Results

The idea that an advanced knowledge of grammar is necessary for working with NNEs was the most common reason cited for the lack of confidence experienced by tutors in my study. In addition to the misperception that all assigned English Language Learners (ELL) tutors (this center had specially designated ELL tutors) possessed special knowledge, all the tutors felt that NNEs knew the “grammar rules” better than most native English speakers

(NES), including the tutors themselves. When asked if he always felt qualified to help, Todd answered,

No. I don't know enough about the English language structurally, formally, terms. I'm just not familiar with them and never had to study them. [For me,] they are implicit.

Even more “grammar confident” tutors had some reservations, like Katherine, who expressed her confidence saying, “grammatically I feel like I'm almost always prepared.” Still, she contradicted herself on this point when she explained that she was not always sure that she was the most capable tutor for NNEs. Specifically, she said,

I can point out [a grammar] instance in the paper, but I don't know how to help [NNEs]. I guess it's because I don't know the rules.

Like several of the tutors, Katherine believed that her grammar knowledge was acceptable for working with NESs because, like her, they were unfamiliar with the formal rules, relying instead on their sense of how things should sound/be written. However, when working with the NNEs she felt obligated to be able to cite very specific grammar rules.

Perhaps the tutors were overly sensitive about their knowledge, or lack thereof, of grammar rules because they were all first-term graduate students in an English Department with a strong Composition and Rhetoric program. Throughout the interviews, these M.A. students in English expressed the view that they should know more about formal grammar. However, they were perfectly comfortable with their knowledge when working with NESs; only when discussing

NNESs did they lack confidence. This preoccupation with rules is particularly interesting considering that grammar was not the focus of their general writing center training. Still, the new tutors believed they had an obligation to address local issues first with NNESs, often never addressing global issues because of session time constraints.

Overall, several conclusions from my early study continue to be provocative:

1. The qualification perceptions of the new tutors appear to be misguided and, therefore, can be modified.
2. The grammar knowledge new tutors feel is necessary for working with NNESs is obtainable.
3. Training can easily be changed to accommodate the tutors' needs and boost their confidence.
4. The interactions with NNESs can be increased to provide new tutors with the experience they need to feel comfortable.
5. Negative expectations can be addressed before tutors begin working in the center.
6. A communication "barrier" between new tutors and NNESs is a preconceived assumption that does not materialize as a substantial problem.

Overall, tutors interviewed in my early study expressed an overarching concern: a perceived lack of qualifications where grammar instruction for NNESs was the issue. The tutors in this center who were specifically assigned to work

with NNEs did not always have special ELL training. Nevertheless, the new tutors held the belief that these special tutors were more qualified than they were. Even if special ELL tutors are available in a center and are more qualified (and in the case of this center the special ELL tutors often only had the desire to do this work rather than any special training), then new tutors can gain the same qualifications and develop the skills they need to feel more confident.

One of the first steps in making new tutors more comfortable may be a clarification of the perceived, although sometimes erroneous, distinction about specialized tutoring. Even though grammar issues are often more prevalent, the need to address global issues still remains. New tutors need to realize that the goals for tutoring NNEs are sometimes the same as those for NESs. As tutors begin to see that the overarching expectations for working with NESs and NNEs are in many ways similar (that they should help the tutee become a better writer not only a better editor), the tutors may more quickly become confident in their role.

Any focus on grammar issues requires tutors to have some fluency in discussing the rules. Early experience working with NNEs may boost tutors' confidence regarding grammar knowledge since new tutors can gain the grammar knowledge that they feel is necessary for working with this group. Many new tutors are actually intimidated by the NNEs they are attempting to help because the NNEs are more familiar with formal grammar rules. A limited amount of training in this area could easily alleviate tutors' fears and encourage

tutors to trust their intuitive sense of how the language functions while giving them the appropriate tools to discuss the rules.

A Lens for Current Concerns

Thinking about the earlier study as a lens for critical issues that are manifesting in my center has caused me to rethink the disciplinary approach about teaching grammar. Considering how much we should teach grammar and under what circumstances is an interesting challenge that requires creative approaches.

When tutors are trained, they are often told to focus first on the global issues (e.g., thesis, organization, audience awareness, logic, etc.), and that local issues (e.g., punctuation, spelling, mechanics) should only be addressed after global problems have been resolved. Some tutees are strongly resistant to this approach, and they can become so forceful that tutors lapse into a kind of copyediting-submission. Because this is a frequent tutoring scenario, much attention is given to training tutors not to give in to a tutee's demands for a grammar-focused session. As Myers (2003) argues, there is no practical reason why writing center tutors should not explicitly point out errors to NNESs and provide examples through which these tutees can learn to correct future errors. No matter the debate about whether grammar should be a focus, it seems clear tutors should be better prepared to work with tutees who need grammar help. In making a commitment to offer this help, we must also institute new training programs for tutors.

Very little attention is given to training tutors who may not have the vocabulary to adequately provide good grammar instruction. I contend that we should spend more time training tutors to help with grammar because they may need to do this first in order to move students toward more important help. Providing this training accomplishes three important goals: (1) Tutors will develop more self-confidence and a greater sense of authority in their role. (2) Tutors will have the skills to more efficiently address local concerns as a means to move more quickly to addressing global concerns. (3) Tutors will be able to accommodate tutees' initial concerns (allowing tutees to feel that they got what they wanted from a session) while maintaining the ability to move past grammar to address more critical writing problems/concerns.

Because tutors are likely to be on the front lines of grammar instruction, we must consider how they are trained. Specifically, we need to redirect the focus for “grammar instruction” to the tutor, making it an important pedagogical consideration—one that is almost entirely separate from arguments about teaching grammar. Giving tutors the skills necessary to help tutees with grammar problems is absolutely necessary, but frequently overlooked. If we do not do more to prepare tutors, the students who visit our centers will not receive the help they need.

At the college level, the responsibility for teaching grammar and mechanics usually falls on the composition instructors who teach first-year writing. Many instructors have been given pedagogical training that encourages a top-down approach to writing instruction: an approach that places grammar and

mechanics taught in isolation at the bottom of the priority list, a result of the landmark meta-analysis study by Hillock (1986). The teaching of grammar is a crucial point of contention for many instructors who have been trained in the top-down model that misreads Hillock's meta-analysis by ignoring that teaching grammar in context is productive. On the other hand, and despite Hillock's findings that provided clear evidence that isolated grammar instruction, i.e., grammar instruction that is not contextual, has little or no effect on the quality of writing; other studies demonstrate that many instructors are suspicious of advice that grammar need not be taught (Benjamin, 2012; Carroll, 2012; Lindblom and Dunn, 2012; Micciche, 2012; Taylor, 1986). Over the last 26 years, the focus on whether grammar should be taught remains a strong point of contention, and students assimilate the urgency of this issue. While the evidence may show that focusing on grammar in isolation (Hillock, 1986; Nunan, 2012) is ineffective in making students better writers, other reasons exist for focusing on grammar: the writing tutorial being an important one because tutors may need to take a grammar detour to get tutees to move on to other issues. Therefore, we do need to teach grammar to our tutors.

In addition to considering how we teach grammar to our tutors, it is important to understand what grammar instruction our tutors and tutees might already experience. How is grammar instruction actually experienced by most university students? For many, grammar "instruction" is realized by the consultation of a handbook—almost always a required text in first-year writing courses. This use of handbooks means that students face grammar challenges

in ways that are isolated, i.e., addressing grammar is a task conducted apart from the classroom (and sometimes apart from a particular assignment), and for NNEs a lack of English fluency may greatly inhibit their ability to understand such texts. When we isolate grammar problems, they take on a kind of “dirty little secret” quality—something needing quick, but quiet, triage. When language fluency is added to the equation (and in writing centers this is a common issue), the problem becomes even more complex. A tendency of many constituencies exists to pass off grammar as someone else’s problem. Even instructors teaching first-year writing are likely to have little or no training in grammar instruction, and if they are under the age of 40 probably never had much formal grammar instruction when they were students.

Technological advances have also changed reactions about grammar and mechanics, and put the focus back on grammar in an unexpected way. Many people who obsess about grammar feel an assessment mechanism for grammar is available to everyone. Some mistakenly believe a word-processing program ensures the document is readable even though the use of a grammar checker actually distorts what really makes texts readable. While grammar checkers can be useful in some ways (e.g., catching subject-verb agreement problems), in other ways, especially for NNEs, they are far from helpful because they cannot make more sophisticated distinctions about syntax and idiomatic usage. Even in very basic ways, grammar checkers miss errors (e.g., allowing an incorrect word choice).

Here I pause to make a distinction between Common Standard English (CSE) grammar and the broader ideas about convention and correctness—especially in disciplinary writing. Grammar is far more fluid/flexible than most people understand. Tutors must also negotiate the important differences of disciplinary writing, and most tutors are trained to consider writing across the disciplines and how conventions vary. Correctness is often a matter of what a particular group accepts. Even in our everyday lives we make exceptions based on accepted conventions (think: Twitter or texting and the abbreviated styles accepted in both cases, e.g., “LOL”). Perhaps it is because many people intuit such distinctions, if not fully recognize them, that issues of convention seem less foreign than being asked to diagram a sentence. This may be why training tutors to consider appropriate disciplinary conventions is a more inviting option than training tutors to teach the rules of CSE.

Trends in Grammar Training for Tutors

Are we addressing grammar at all in our tutor training? In the case of NNEs, the answer is yes—in some very limited ways. Essentially, tutors are taught to acknowledge grammar and mechanical errors, but again to shift focus as quickly as possible to more global issues. Practically speaking, when tutors encounter NNEs in sessions, they tend to expect the focus to be, at least in part, about grammar. While NNEs projects certainly have grammar errors, NNEs possess certain advantages over NNEs with many aspects of language use. For example, they have much greater fluency about idiomatic expression. NNEs are also more likely to consider grammar and mechanics as nuisances because

they are not worried about proving fluency. When “the rules” are a point of conversation, NESs seem more concerned with being done with a project rather than actually learning specific rules. Perhaps all this is one reason why the literature about grammar instruction is generally related to NNEs.

Students whose first language is not English have special grammar needs. NNEs frequently need extra help with their communication projects and accordingly they turn to writing centers (Arkin, 1982; Brooks, 1981; Harris and Silva, 1986; Powers, 1993). Unfortunately, many tutors have no experience working with NNEs and, consequently, these tutors may be particularly apprehensive (sometimes even strongly antagonistic) about working with NNEs; therefore, writing center directors may be faced with the challenge of specialized training for reluctant tutors or hiring ELL specialist tutors.

Although a substantial amount of literature addresses the basics of tutor training for working with NNEs, most of it focuses on practical suggestions for tutoring sessions, cultural considerations, or means of making the NNE more comfortable (Cai, 1994; Friedlander, 1984; Harris, 1982, 1986, 1990; Kennedy, 1993; Meyer and Smith, 1987; Powers, 1993; Ridpath, 1992; Thonus, 1993; Wong, 1994). Much of this literature appears as practical advice, and little scholarship addresses how tutors’ self-perception and self-confidence affects the NNE tutoring dynamic. Instead, the scholarship centers around the needs of the NNEs rather than focusing on the tutors. An example of this tutee-focused sentiment is expressed by Arkin, who explains, “by understanding [NNEs] unique problems you can help them gain confidence...[and] you must learn

strategies for dealing with them” (1982, p. 7). The question Arkin addresses is how to make NNEs gain confidence. Yet, even if the NNEs gain confidence, this will not alleviate tutoring session problems caused by a lack of tutor confidence. Since the ultimate goal is to have the most productive and successful sessions possible, the needs of both the tutors and the tutees should be examined. Therefore, before tutors can be more thoroughly effective in sessions with NNEs, we must investigate tutors’ reservations about working with this special population and provide training to alleviate these reservations.

While most of the existing literature addresses issues that focus on the tutee rather than the tutor, some literature, albeit quite limited, more directly concerns itself with the tutor. Still, this literature is primarily pedagogical—how can tutors be better tutors—rather than being sensitive to the needs of the tutor. For example, Harris and Silva (1993) find that many tutors are frightened by the prospect of working with NNEs, but their solution is to set up clear parameters about what should be dealt with in a given tutoring session. More specifically, Harris and Silva are concerned with creating a situation where “[ELL] writers [are not] separated out as different or unlike other students” (1993, p. 526). Here again the shift is toward the tutee. The primary focus becomes a pedagogical commentary about *how to tutor*, and while this information is valuable to tutors, it does not speak to problem of reducing apprehensions.

The one aspect of tutors’ feelings that the existing literature does address is the idea that tutors often suffer from feelings of inadequacy, although usually with only a sentence or two (Brooks, 1981; David, Graham and Richards, 1988;

Hoffman, 1982; Leitzel, 1995; Noonan, 1982). Many of these sources are tutor reflections, which is interesting because one might expect more information about the personal feelings of the tutor. However, like other sources, these reflections mention the tutors' feelings but quickly redirect the discussion to the needs of the NNEs.

To be fair, ignoring discussions that focus on the tutee is difficult, as the considerations presented *become* issues for the tutor. However, none of the existing literature focuses on the tutor as a separate entity in the tutoring process; in other words, a tutor's needs are never isolated from those of the tutee. Certainly, the tutor and tutee are inextricably connected through the tutoring process. Interestingly, the literature has no problem isolating the needs of the tutee separate from the tutor. Perhaps, this is a natural given it is the tutee who needs help while any tutor can provide help.

Despite the general lack of attention to tutors' needs, three sources make a fair attempt at addressing this issue. Fink (1990) reports the results of the questionnaire she administered asking tutors to identify the major problems associated with tutoring international students. Her research demonstrated that tutors suffer from feelings of inadequacy when working with NNEs. Specifically, they believed that a language barrier existed and that they were unqualified to explain language rules. The majority of the respondents felt that tutoring NNEs was different from tutoring native speakers and that, consequently, some avoid working with NNEs. Ultimately, Fink found that training provided greater self-confidence, which resulted in a less frustrating tutoring experience. Amato (1992)

discusses antagonism on the part of tutors. She reports on the reactions of three tutors who “were visibly and vocally unhappy about working so many hours with non-native speakers” (p. 2). She discounts much of the reaction of two of the tutors saying that they were generally discontented, but is still concerned with the unhappiness of the other tutor. However, Amato shifts away from the specific feelings of the tutors to focus instead on what she believes are their lack of tutoring skills. Amato argues that writing tutors do not really think about the writing process and that tutors need to be better trained in the concepts of basic writing and error analysis as presented in Mina Shaughnessy’s book *Errors and Expectations* (1977/as cited in Amato, 1992). Amato equates working with NESs and NNEs, saying, “writing as a second language accounts for much of what we already do” (p. 5). In other words, she integrates basic writing problems of NESs with the problems faced by NNEs. In this scenario, any student who cannot write well in English is considered a kind of second language student. Although Amato’s research may have originated with complaints from tutors, her focus becomes one of how to apply a certain theory to the tutoring of all students, without addressing specific feelings of the tutors.

In another survey, inspired by Fink’s earlier research, Devet, et al (Devet, Burr, Chan, Farrar, & Ogawa, 1997) again explore the problems tutors face in working with NNEs. Although the beginning focuses on the tutor respondents, as with other discussions, the quick mention of tutor anxiety is followed by a shift to ways in which tutors can better assist NNEs.

Ultimately, the overarching aim of the available literature is to design tutoring programs that are more successful in meeting the special needs of NNEs. Obviously, programs must include a focus on technique and strategies, but the lack of attention given to such a significant component—the tutors themselves—may undermine the potential success of a tutoring center's effort to serve NNEs. We must address this lack of attention through an examination of those who are currently struggling with their roles as tutors of NNEs. Specifically, what causes tutors to feel comfortable or uncomfortable in working with NNEs, and what can be done to increase tutor self-confidence and comfort for working with NNEs?

New Approaches

As a result of rethinking my earlier research in the context of the current conversations I am having with tutors in my center, I have specific suggestions:

1. We need to place tutors' needs alongside the needs of tutees, rather than subordinating tutors' needs. To create this equity, we must encourage frank dialogues about tutors' apprehensions for working within particular tutoring scenarios. From these discussions we can create training programs/modules that specifically meet the needs of our tutors. In the case of my center, I would need various levels of instruction, given that some tutors have more grammar knowledge than others.
2. We should eliminate fundamentalist views of grammar and mechanics. Because so much of our work means understanding the differences in disciplinary discourse conventions, we can easily extend our thinking. We

must make explicit efforts to educate ourselves and others throughout our institutions about the fluidity of grammar and mechanics. Doing so may help minimize the front-end focus on grammar and mechanics that many students seek while they deny having any additional writing-related problems.

3. Even if we can minimize some of the fundamentalist views, we must acknowledge that we cannot afford NOT to teach grammar—continuing to essentially ignore the issue is naïve, given the work we ask of our tutors and the needs of our tutees (and by extension the demands of our faculty). The focus on grammar is not going to wholly dissipate. Instructors from disciplines where communication skills are seen as necessary but not fundamental will often focus on a missing comma rather than poor organization because making a red circle on a paper is much easier than teaching someone how to organize their ideas. Tutors are taught never to criticize an instructor, but most tutors quickly learn that some comments matter more than others and that the lack of truly substantive feedback from an instructor may be an indication of that instructor's inability to articulate ways to improve the writing (leaving some students to mistakenly believe that grammar is their only problem).
4. Raising the issues in the light of current contexts means we must challenge some of our own disciplinary conventions. Taking time to address at least one grammar concern per session (especially when students are specifically requesting this help) will engender more trust that we are sensitive to the students' concerns. After we gain their trust, students will be more inclined to

listen to other suggestions about what needs attention in their work.

The biggest challenge for most of us will be training our tutors to address grammar and mechanics. Because few people outside of linguistics really understand the specifics of grammar, training tutors may require a multifaceted approach. If you cannot support a linguist on your staff, here are some other suggestions for including grammar instruction for tutors:

- 1) Partner with linguistics professionals for developing (or teaching) training modules.
- 2) Prioritize what you teach by the frequency of grammar problems.
- 3) Cluster errors by class or category.
- 4) Compile a set of in situ texts that do not decentralize grammar from context.
- 5) Use a variety of training approaches (website, lectures, self-study, consultation, etc.).
- 6) Keep the focus on the psychological, political, and social reasons for “good grammar” rather than on a rules-based approach.

While many constituencies need to be educated about the importance of grammar instruction, we do a disservice to both tutor and tutee by not giving more attention to the issue ourselves. By providing tutors with the skills and vocabulary to talk with authority about grammar issues, we help them both correct grammar problems and move more effectively and quickly toward global concerns. Steering tutors and their tutees away from the grammar conversation creates a barrier that can undermine the entire tutoring process.

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