

EMPOWERING MULTILINGUAL WRITERS: CHALLENGING THE ENGLISH-ONLY TUTORING IDEOLOGY AT UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTERS

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The English-only principle is widely adopted in classroom instruction in U.S. universities and blended into writing center (WC) tutoring, where it is focused on the practice of tutoring multilingual writers whose first language (L1) is not English. Although some WC scholars value multilingualism, whether English-only tutoring is optimal for multilingual writers is less established. This report questions the authority of English-only tutoring pedagogy and explores the possibility of employing multilingual writers' L1 in tutorials from both multilingual writers' and multilingual tutors' perspectives. The study findings indicate that multilingual writers' L1 is often needed in facilitating the development of their writing and English skills, suggesting that WCs help to empower multilingual writers through transforming to become multilingual resources.

Keywords: English-only, first language (L1), multilingual writers, second language (L2), tutoring, writing center (WC)

Although the phrase "English only" refers to injunctions against immigrants in the United States (Crawford, 1992a, 1992b, 1998, 2000; Judd, 2000), the English-only principle has long served as a tenet of the U.S. educational system. Macedo (2017) disclosed that even though non-English speaking students are in the majority in most urban public schools, educational policies still exclude all other languages. Similarly, the English-only principle is widely employed in higher education; at universities, English has been the only medium of instruction in writing classrooms, and this practice extends to university writing center (WC) tutoring. From a historical perspective, the state of a university WC is seen as a byproduct of college composition pedagogy and instruction. In other words, when WCs began to be established in the late 1970s, they initially served the students who enrolled in writing courses, the majority of whom were traditional students whose first language (L1) was English. Accordingly, WC theories and tutoring practices were heavily influenced by L1 English writing instruction and thus were developed to assist L1 students.

With the influx of international students¹ enrolling in U.S. institutions, however, the WC client structure has changed greatly, as more and more international students who speak a home language other than English visit the WCs seeking assistance in writing English. Two decades ago, the average percentage of international student writers at WCs was 30 to 40 percent; 10 years ago, the percentage increased to at least 50 percent during spring and fall semesters, and 60 to 70 percent during the summer sessions (Wang, 2012). Multiple presentations at the International Writing Centers Association 2019 Annual Conference indicated that this percentage remained stable. For example, Purdue Writing Lab statistical reports showed that in the past three academic years, 65 to 73 percent of the WC clients during spring and fall semesters were international students; even during the current Covid-19 pandemic, 62 percent of the tutorial sessions were booked for international students at the Purdue Writing Lab (H. Denny, personal

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communication, June 30, 2020). Similarly, in this Spring 2020 semester, the Ohio State University Writing Center had 55 percent of their international students come in for walk-in tutoring sessions; when the university switched to remote teaching, 59 percent of their online tutoring clients were international students (C. Manion, personal communication, June 30, 2020). Such growth of the international student population in higher education challenges writing programs and WCs nationwide to establish a critically important agenda: working effectively with this burgeoning and adept group of multilingual writers, who may well have more than one L1. These students are not specifically identified in this report, but readers should keep in mind that bilingual and multilingual students increasingly present to WCs with more than one L1.²

Notably, these writers have completed schooling in their home countries and are pursuing further education in the United States. Therefore, their L1 is a trove of cognitive and linguistic resources for L2 acquisition and development (Fu & Matoush, 2006), and as such are not limitations (Canagarajah, 2002, 2005). Furthermore, from the educational advancement perspective, the English-only principle potentially reinforces ethnocentrism, privileging standard English over other languages or language varieties.

Background

In recent years, translingualism in writing has been widely discussed and promoted in composition instruction, including L2 writing instruction. Proposed by Horner et al. (2011), this approach raises the awareness of language diversity in writing classrooms, “see[ing] difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading and listening” (p. 303) and in “view[ing] language differences and fluidities as resources to be preserved, developed and utilized” (p. 304). Following these perspectives, translingualism moves from discussing only the issue of language rights to promoting language use for meaning-making purposes, as well as broadening the repertoire of students’ linguistic resources. In this way, note Shapiro et al. (2016), the translingual approach subverts the English-only ideology, viewing multilingualism as “an asset or resource,” not “a deficit or obstacle,” and arguing that classroom instruction “reflect[s] the valuing of multiple linguistic codes” (p. 31).

In support of this view, scholars have recently raised the issue of translingualism at WCs, reflecting a shifting attitude toward language differences. Trimbur (2000) criticized WCs for ignoring the importance of writing in languages other than English, and urged that WCs transform to become multilingual development centers. Wilson (2012) proposed that WCs shift from a monolingual to a multilingual paradigm to meet multilingual writers’ needs. Wang’s (2012) study of WC ideology revealed that, resulting from its adherence to English-only, multilingual writers often could not get sufficient assistance at WCs. Because multilingual writers’ assignments, especially at the graduate level, were either discipline specific or related to their home cultures and histories, this required tutors to have some contextual knowledge. The result was that multilingual writers preferred to work with those tutors who could engage in meaning making in shared languages other than English. To recognize this preference, Wang (2012) called for WCs to better train monolingual tutors and to hire multilingual tutors. In addition, research also has found that although some tutors have employed multilingual writers’ native language to work with these writers, they question whether doing so is legitimate, even though the code-mixing of the writer’s home language and the English language appears to work effectively for multilingual writers (Dvorak, 2016).

In light of these findings, more WC scholars have suggested transforming WCs into multilingual spaces, with the goal of enhancing working sessions with multilingual writers. In his book *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*, Rafoth (2015) notes the often unbalanced tutoring relationship that results when multilingual writers possess more content knowledge and broader cultural experience than their monolingual tutors; he calls for preparing tutors to work with culturally adept multilingual writers. Based on her experience of directing a multilingual WC, Lape has published a guidebook this year (2020) for developing a multilingual WC, with valuable methods and tutor training guidance for WC administrators.

Some universities began to allow bilingual tutoring at their WCs, though so far only in Canadian French-English institutions such as at the Writing Center of University of Ottawa and at the Spanish-English-speaking institutions on the U.S.–Mexico border (Hotson, 2017). The plausibility of tutoring multilingual writers in their native language is still at the stage of being recognized, and as yet is inadequately researched. This report discusses, from both the multilingual tutors’ and multilingual writers’ perspectives, whether multilingual tutoring can facilitate English writing development and foster cultural understanding.

Data and Method

Critical research stresses the necessity of critiquing the current ideology, seeking to expose dominating or oppressive relationships in society (Hatch, 2002). With the purpose of empowering multilingual writers at the WCs to receive appropriate tutoring services, I questioned the authority of English-only tutoring pedagogy for multilingual writers. Within the critical theoretical framework, which aims to “critique, challenge, transform and empower” (Merriam, 2002, p. 327), this study investigated the effectiveness of tutoring multilingual writers in their home language by gaining an understanding of the lived experience of multilingual tutoring through the perspective of both writers and tutors.

Two multilingual tutors and four multilingual writers participated in this qualitative study (see Table 1; all names are pseudonyms). Dr. Santos, an L1 speaker of Portuguese from Brazil who earned her doctorate in linguistics in that country, was a visiting scholar, teaching and tutoring in the ESL program at a public comprehensive university in the Appalachian region, where the three L1 Brazilian, Portuguese-speaking students, Angela, Leila, and Sandra, were attending. Dr. Han, an L1 speaker of Chinese, who earned her doctorate in composition and TESOL in the United States, was an English department faculty member at a public university in the Northeast where Shelly, a master’s program student in music education from China, was attending.

Unlike typical WC tutors, who are often students themselves, the two tutors in this study were all faculty members with backgrounds in applied linguistics and L2 writing; they also drew on their rich teaching experiences. The multilingual writers in this study chose to work specifically with these tutors instead of with monolingual tutors, who were either faculty members or peers. The tutors worked with the writers during one semester, for sessions ranging from 60–90 minutes, once or twice a week. All participants consented to the study. Participant affiliation is provided in Table 1:

Table 1

Affiliation of Participants

Participants	Tutors	Writers	Program
Portuguese-speaking	Dr. Santos	Angela, Leila, Sandra	ESL
Chinese-speaking	Dr. Han	Shelly	MA, Music Education

Data collection was conducted via interviewing the writers and having the tutors write a self-reflection of their tutoring experience in the writers’ native language. Before conducting the interviews, I reached out to these writers through email, asking if they would be interested in sharing their tutoring experiences. I attached general, open-ended questions: “What is your experience of using your home language in the tutorials? In your opinion, is it necessary? Please explain why or why not in detail and provide examples if possible.” I then conducted 20- to 40-minute semi-structured phone interviews with these four multilingual writers. The two tutors wrote self-reflections via email about their experiences and their opinions concerning whether languages other than English should be allowed in tutorials (these emails were lightly edited for clarity but otherwise unchanged). When analyzing my data, I first applied the deductive approach, finding quotations and examples in the data to support my assumptions. I switched to an inductive approach when new themes emerged from the data by following the analytic procedures,

organizing the data to generate themes, and coding the data to offer interpretations through analytic memos (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

Multilingual Writers' Opinions

Angela. Angela, a beginning-level ESL student, explicitly expressed her preference for working with a tutor who could communicate with her in Portuguese. Compared to working with native English-speaking tutors, Angela felt "much [more] comfortable" working with Dr. Santos. As Angela explained, "Dr. Santos spoke in English when tutoring me, but when she noticed that I was not there anymore, she brought me to reality in Portuguese to understand." According to Angela, "Tutors have to be prepared for working with real beginners who are not fluent in English," and "Tutors need to understand and speak a little about the student's language and culture to really help." She further mentioned that "If the tutor knows some aspects of our culture, [a] better interaction with the beginning-level student for our learning [would happen]." These observations clearly show that Angela's English comprehension depended heavily on her tutor's translations; she also noted the importance of quality interaction and being comfortable with a tutor who speaks Portuguese. For Angela, using her L1 in tutorials assisted her understanding, meaning making, and cultural expression. Working with a tutor who understands her L1, she said, also helped her learn English "comfortably."

Leila. Leila, another beginning-level ESL student, expressed her similar need for a tutor who can understand and speak her home language, Portuguese. According to Leila, "A tutor who speaks my language is really needed because [if] I didn't understand what the teacher says in the classroom, I can ask the tutor to explain and translate it for me in my native language." She added, "[It] is really helpful for me to know what I need to do in class. I become confident and motivated to write my homework and attend the writing class." Leila clearly used her L1 as a resource; without it, her reflections suggested that she would be lost. In this regard, a tutor who can interact with Leila through her L1 helps her the most, motivating her to continue developing her proficiency and writing in English.

Sandra. Sandra, an intermediate-level ESL student whose L1 is Portuguese, agreed with the significance of the L1 in writing tutorials. As she noted, "When the tutor knows the student's native language, she can use the same language as a support[ive] tool to clarify the meaning, the unknown words, or messages for the student." Sandra stated that in some cases, "Students are confused or can't communicate well if the tutor understands only English," whereas "Using the same mother tongue to clarify the meaning is necessary." She pointed out the importance of the L1—the mother tongue—as "a psychological factor" in language learning. As she explained, "When the students know the tutor can speak their native language, they would feel calm and learn." Now reassured, such students would then "take risks, show their [confusion] in learning as they know they can use their mother tongue to ask the tutor when having difficulties." Sandra revealed her need to feel fully comfortable to express her ideas, and it appeared that a multilingual setting helped her achieve that comfort level.

Shelly. Shelly, the speaker of Chinese as her L1, preferred to work with Dr. Han because "[I] lacked the appropriate English words to express my ideas or feelings in English, but I could express them in Chinese properly and accurately. So I decided to visit Dr. Han. That way, she helped me express myself in proper English." Shelly further stated that "I was comfortable working with Dr. Han in Chinese and I don't think using Chinese interfered with my English writing; actually, it helped me with both my writing and English." Shelly remarked that when she encountered difficulty in choosing an appropriate word, Dr. Han often provided her several words in English with an explanation of each in Chinese. Further, she also offered the different forms and collocations of each word so that Shelly could distinguish their subtle differences and then choose by herself which word fits best. For Shelly, employing the Chinese language in tutoring helped improve her general vocabulary and understanding of English grammar. She commented that "Dr. Han not only edited my paper, but also explained and taught me how to use English appropriately. So I

improved my grades too!”

Shelly observed another benefit of being tutored in her L1: “As a Chinese student, I wanted to share my insights with the tutor who understood Chinese culture with [the] hope that the Chinese language would bridge any cultural gaps and dispel stereotypes [misunderstanding about culture-specific concepts].” As Shelly recalled, one of her assignments was to write an introduction to a traditional Chinese musical instrument, while another was to analyze how Chinese culture influences Chinese music genres. Without hesitation, Shelly visited Dr. Han for tutoring. For Shelly, working on content-specific essays with a tutor who speaks Chinese was much easier than working with a native English-speaking tutor who most likely would have had little knowledge of Chinese language, culture, history, and music. She stated, “Working with Dr. Han proved to be very helpful.” While she acknowledged that “Meeting a native English-speaking tutor would give me another opportunity to discuss my paper and hear what a different tutor will say,” she believed that Dr. Han would best help her in this situation.

Summary of Multilingual Writers’ Opinions

All three Portuguese-speaking ESL writers expressed specific needs for using their home language in tutoring. To Angela, Dr. Santos demonstrated the necessity of a bilingual tutor, because Dr. Santos understood her and showed particular interest in her writing. Angela stated the importance of meaningful interactions in tutorials; for her, using her home language could meet that goal. For Leila, using her L1 to discuss her written assignments with a tutor who spoke that language was essential, because doing so helped her understand and follow the assignment requirements appropriately, which in turn motivated her to continue studying and build her confidence as a language learner. Her tutor played not only a role of helper in understanding her course work, but also served as a mediator in developing her language as well as in increasing her confidence level. Sandra also spoke for the significance of home language use in her language improvement and idea expression. She believed that language learners should have the freedom to use their L1 as a tool in clarifying language-level confusion, expressing ideas, and facilitating overall language development. Even more important, her assertion of the need for a certain comfort level when working with a tutor highlights that writers must have the right to use their home language if it eases and enhances their experiences in WCs. Shelly’s English proficiency was at a higher level than that of the three Portuguese-speaking ESL writers. Accordingly, her written assignments were more demanding in both quality and quantity. However, similar to the three ESL writers, Shelly also demonstrated a need to use her home language for both language-level and content-specific help. For Shelly, tutorials in Chinese could make her feel comfortable enough to share insights with confidence.

The four multilingual writers’ unified opinion of using their home language in tutorials indicates that no matter the level of English proficiency, there is a perceived need among these multilingual learners to strengthen their writing skills and proficiency level in all their languages. Their request to use their home language in tutorials for understanding meaning, requesting and receiving clarification, and working through appropriate idea expression reveals that most multilingual writers may still “carry the burden of learning to write and learning English at the same time” (Hyland, 2003, p. 34). Moreover, it is seen that when multilingual writers cannot adequately express themselves in English or when they write disciplinary-specific content, they employ the affordances provided by their high cognitive and linguistic competence in their L1. Thus, at WCs, multilingual writers’ home language can serve as a powerful means of assisting their L2 development and L2 writing.

Most important, allowing multilingual writers’ home language to be used provides a learning atmosphere conducive for them, which greatly boosts their confidence and motivation in writing and language development. The tutor-writer interaction seemed to be both easier and richer via a shared L1. Therefore, multilingual writers feel it is suitable, practical, and helpful to use their home language to work with those tutors who are able to understand them, value their thoughts and efforts, share their culture, and offer them direct assistance and support.

Multilingual Tutors' Opinions

Dr. Santos. Reflecting on her tutoring experience with the three Brazilian ESL writers, Dr. Santos strongly advocated using multilingual writers' home language in tutorials. She recognized the inadequacy of English-only tutoring and the need for incorporating writers' L1 in assisting their L2 writing and overall language development. As a linguist and an experienced English professor, Dr. Santos seconded Kramsch's (1993) argument that learning language and learning culture are inextricably linked. Thus, when she tutored her ESL students, she not only worked on their language use, but also showed her interest in the culture represented in their written assignments. For her, "This is a way to support L2 writers in developing their learning and comprehension of the new language and culture."

Dr. Santos related Krashen's (1982) L2 acquisition theories—particularly his affective filter and compressible input hypotheses—to L2 writers' learning processes. According to her, ESL writers need a comfortable learning environment in which to develop their L2 and L2 writing. Thus, she asserted, "During the learning process, writers' L1 should be allowed in order to help them feel secure and supported and to comprehend the writing assignments and express meaning." For Dr. Santos, a tutor who speaks and understands writers' L1 is ideal because "that way, the tutor can immediately help the writer in [their] native language with clearing up confusion and regaining confidence in L2." The direct help in a writer's home language, according to Dr. Santos, is indispensable among ESL writers, who are developing their oral and writing skills simultaneously. Reflecting on her tutoring, Dr. Santos affirmed her belief that roles went beyond those of a WC tutor to include reader, editor, cheerleader, and instructor. As she observed, "Tutors should learn to be flexible and play multiple roles to facilitate writers to achieve their goals."

Dr. Han. When Dr. Han was tutoring Shelly, they mostly spoke in Chinese at Shelly's request. Shelly was unsure about her English skills in fully comprehending written assignments and expressing herself clearly. Dr. Han saw the legitimacy of using Chinese after a few tutoring sessions with Shelly and listening to Shelly introduce her ideas in Chinese, and she used Chinese to help Shelly develop and accurately express ideas when working on content-specific texts and abstract meanings. Dr. Han also recognized the advantage to Shelly of using Chinese when discussing grammatical issues in Shelly's writing.

Dr. Han observed that Shelley had made much progress in her English development. To some degree, she believed that Shelly's advancement is a result of the employment of Chinese, because, as she noted, "Using Chinese allowed Shelly to better express her ideas and to understand my explanations. It also helped me comprehend her written texts when I was confused by her intention in English." For Dr. Han, Chinese was not an interference but a means to success, as communicating via the shared language helped build a tutor-writer rapport. In addition, a new theme that emerged in Dr. Han's reflection was that multiple tutoring strategies helped Shelly advance her writing, rather than any single strategy alone.

When reflecting on her experience with Shelly and other multilingual writers, Dr. Han suggested that tutors should relinquish some strict tutoring practices to help empower writers and facilitate their L2 writing development, including abandoning English-only tutoring. Dr. Han also acknowledged that, oftentimes and unavoidably, she plays a teacher's role when working with multilingual writers, not because of her position as a faculty member, but rather because the facilitation of multilingual writers' developing linguistic skills requires her to adopt such a role. According to Dr. Han, WCs are not only places for writing improvement, but also advocates for equal justice and enlightened education for all types of writers. As she explained:

If English-speaking writing students are allowed to use their native language working with tutors, then multilingual writers should have the equal right to use their native languages to work with

tutors, especially when these writers need to use their L1 and knowledge in self-expression and L2 learning.

Dr. Han also posited that allowing other languages than English in tutoring is an important step in empowering multilingual students for educational achievement in the dominant English-only teaching and learning environment.

Summary of Multilingual Tutors' Opinions

Based on their teaching and tutoring experiences, as well as their knowledge of L2 acquisition and writing theories and practices, both tutors supported the professional consensus that sufficient grammar and lexical knowledge is still essential for most multilingual writers (Byrd & Reid, 1998; Hinkel, 2002, 2004), and that writers' primary needs at WCs include language development. In their opinion, novice and ESL writers seek understanding and self-expression, as well as a level of emotional comfort, when working with tutors; tutors using the L1 provide such a nurturing atmosphere. For their part, more advanced writers and graduate students also seek content-specific or discipline-related help in writing via in-depth discussion, which the L1 facilitates. In either circumstance, both multilingual writers and tutors should be allowed to utilize multilingual writers' L1 as a resource to advance their rhetorical and linguistic knowledge, build tutor-writer rapport, and explain subject matter, abstract concepts, and the language of a particular academic discipline.

Both tutors recognized that multilingual writers' L1 serves as a cognitive and linguistic resource, assisting the writers in scaffolding their ideas in L2 writing while simultaneously improving their L2 writing output. Based on their tutoring experience, they did not see multilingual writers' home language as interfering with L2 development, but rather that it worked well in helping multilingual writers become skillful L2 writers and speakers. In addition, both tutors remarked that when working with multilingual writers, they played multiple roles. They were linguistic and cultural informants, and they offered instructional assistance as teachers, editors, conversational partners, facilitators, and cheerleaders.

Conclusion

Based on the multilingual writers' and tutors' opinions, the study indicates that multilingual writers benefit from multilingual tutoring at all levels in a number of ways, affirming the need for multilingual tutoring service at WCs. It supports the role of multilingual tutoring for language development, suggesting that WCs encourage the use of multilingual writers' home language in tutorials and the hiring of qualified multilingual tutors. It also shows the value of faculty members, themselves multilingual experts in writing, in working with multilingual writers. The findings challenge the conventional English-only tutoring pedagogy at the WCs and call for more adaptable tutoring approaches to multilingual writers. It also indicates a need for tutors to be more flexible with their professional practices and remain willing to avail themselves of all the tools at their disposal based on each multilingual writer's needs.

Grimm (1999) asserted that in the WC context, "Essential truths come under questioning, 'reality' changes with a shift in perspective" (p. 2). From a critical point of view, this study confronts the limitation of the monolingual or autonomous model of literacy, and advocates that WCs reflect on the current exclusive monolingual tutoring ideology and rethink the legitimacy of multilingualism for multilingual writers. To empower multilingual writers with an education that is both equitable and just, this study seeks to encourage advocacy for transforming WCs from monolingual to multilingual centers.

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Notes

¹In this study, the international students are those students who hold F-1 student visas with well-developed L1 literacy; their L1 is other than English. Immigrant students and 1.5-generation students are excluded. Some international students may have more than one home language if they are already bilinguals or multilinguals.

²Though bilingual and multilingual writers' native languages are not English, whether they have only one native language may not be known to a tutor at the beginning of tutoring. For these writers, English then becomes their third or additional language they are learning and using in the U.S. academic learning context.

