



OPEN WORDS: ACCESS AND ENGLISH STUDIES

Vol. 15, No. 1 (December 2023): 163–184.

DOI: 10.37514/OPW-J.2023.15.1.08

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online)

<https://wac.colostate.edu/openwords/>

Multilingual Student Writers in Higher Education: Increasing Support for Multilingual Student Writers in a Writing Center Context

Allie Johnston, Ph.D.

Austin Peay State University

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the process of a new Writing Center Director developing support, training, and resources to support multilingual student writers in tutoring sessions. The study includes responses from multilingual student writers sharing their perspective about the Writing Center as a whole, as well as the voices of current undergraduate and graduate tutors. The goal is to provide examples and ideas for directors in tutoring and writing programs in order to increase support of multilingual writers within their own campus communities. Primarily focusing on three key areas, as addressed by Blazer and Fallon (2020): knowledge (understanding students' experiences with language); attitudes (developing an open mind towards difference); and practice (making and applying meaning to tutoring sessions), this article discusses how to support multilingual student writers. By highlighting the gaps in access within our own campus and Writing Center, this article opens questions as to how tutoring services can continue to be more inclusive and supportive to multilingual writers. This paper offers some concrete strategies for understanding how to approach multilingual student tutoring sessions, improve tutor training practices, and plan events geared towards multilingual students.

Introduction and Institutional Context

When considering the access students have to support and resources, it is necessary to first reflect on the gaps in access for certain populations. As a new faculty member and Writing Center Director, the gaps of access for providing multilingual students writing and research support became apparent in my own Writing Center. Our multilingual students would book Writing Center appointments for clarifying

Open Words: Access and English Studies is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal, published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University and Georgia Southern University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs). ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online). Copyright © 1997-2019 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site's authors, developers, and contributors. Some material is used with permission.

assignment expectations and understanding assignment prompts, preparing for discussion posts and speaking presentations, and making final revisions to their essays, to name a few of the major needs requested. Preparing tutors with knowledge on multilingual writing and tutoring skills was essential, especially in preparing student tutors from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds on best practices for multilingual writers. While tutors could suggest areas of improvement, they could not always best describe the rationale for “Why” behind their suggestions or consider the implications of the U.S. academic writing process that may differ in other cultures. As a Director, I learned the importance of first understanding the needs of multilingual students and then navigating ways to meet those needs while providing adequate support for tutors. While scholarship exists on tutoring strategies for multilingual student writers (Cirillo-McCarthy et al., 2016; Phillips, 2017), this study sought to further those conversations through the perspective of a new Director revamping their current Writing Center and institutional outreach.

One of the challenges of operating academic support services is generating campus awareness that such services exist. When I began in the role, there was in-person closure due to COVID-19. Even after the in-person sessions were made available again, the center still faced challenges with student visitation due to its less visible location in the back of the library. Many students were unfamiliar with our Writing Center. Furthermore, our multilingual students navigated finding support structures with even more challenges.

Our institution is a four-year public, doctoral-level university located less than an hour from Nashville, Tennessee. Nashville’s top languages include English, Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish, Somali, and Vietnamese (Metro Language Access Report, 2017). With a growing population of roughly 75,000 English Language Learners in the Tennessee K-12 school system (Tennessee Department of Education, 2021) and a steadily increasing number of international students on campus of around 130 from 30 different countries, a need exists to provide support to our multilingual student population. Furthermore, our campus hosts a large population of first-generation and military-affiliated students, as well as many non-traditional students and those returning to finish their education after spending several years in the workforce. Our institution’s mission statement posted online notes, “We welcome and inspire an inclusive community of learners to make a positive impact regionally and globally.” While this growth is included in institutional goals, upon my arrival, our Writing Center was not providing enough opportunities to support this inclusivity.

Additionally, our university is focused on improving our student retention rates; institutional data from 2022 shows 43.3% as the current graduation rate (Austin

Peay State University Graduation Rate Report, 2022). Academic support services, such as tutoring in the Writing Center, can be important factors when it comes to students returning semester to semester and successfully completing their degrees. Statistics such as the following highlight this problem especially for multilingual students: According to Barbara Griffin (2018), “ESL students are more likely to drop out within the first two years of college than their English-speaking peers.” This statistic exemplifies the challenges multilingual students face in academic settings. Therefore, writing centers should be intentional in providing support for all members of a student body, from undergraduates to graduate students (Phillips, 2017). Only then can writing centers become spaces of accessibility for multilingual student writers to feel empowered in their own writing and research goals.

The purpose of this study is to highlight our Writing Center’s initiative in creating more access to support and empower multilingual students. The purpose was accomplished by encouraging our Writing Center team to reflect on strengths and shortcomings of providing access to their multilingual student populations. In this study, we highlight the steps taken to improve multilingual students’ access to our Writing Center. Following Sarah Blazer’s (2015) call to utilize discussion, reflection, reading scholarship, and development of resources, our Center has spent time reflecting on how to incorporate these methods for our own student population. The most critical step of multilingual student accessibility has occurred within our own community of staff members. Steps include improving our training practices through readings and guest speakers getting involved as well as planning events geared towards our multilingual students specifically (Rafoth, 2015). Furthermore, our Writing Center has developed a partnership with our campus English Language Institute.

We believe that writing center access first begins with our individual tutors in order to create a welcoming, supportive environment for multilingual students. Building off of Sarah Blazer’s (2015) call to build inclusive multi/trans-cultural environments that facilitate tutors’ development, our goal became focused on equipping tutors in order to foster an accessible environment for all writers. We approached this tutor-focus through three key areas, as addressed by Blazer and Fallon (2020): knowledge (understanding students’ experiences with language); attitudes (developing an open mind towards difference); and practice (making and applying meaning to tutoring sessions). These three areas allowed our program to revamp tutor training in order to improve our services, especially for multilingual student writers.

Writing Center Context

First, it is important to note our own Writing Center context. While our institution was established in 1927, our Writing Center opened its doors 80 years later in 2007. It underwent a variety of staffing and campus location changes before being under our Languages and Literature Department. Since 2021, our Writing Center has been under a time of growth and change, with a new Director and staff, new available resources, and ultimately new goals. In August of 2021, the first faculty position dedicated to Writing Center Director was filled. The Director had just completed graduate school, working as a tutor and then Assistant Director in the Writing Center, with many goals and plans to continue building an effective Writing Center recognized across campus. The Director's first semester was also the first time when the Writing Center was not entirely online since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In seeking ways to best support our multilingual students, our Center first addressed current resources across campus as well as what gaps existed, in order to decide how the Writing Center could best fulfill these students' needs. While the Director's previous experiences as a graduate student in larger R1 universities included working with diverse multilingual writing programs, this institutional context appeared differently, without as many resources directed towards multilingual students. In this Writing Center, there were gaps in resources addressing multilingual writing approaches and cultural practices. My goal quickly became focused on providing multilingual students more direct writing support.

To further complicate matters, the Writing Center was severely understaffed, with a total of seven student tutors (many working five hours a week) to meet a 60-hour weekly schedule. Tutors included undergraduate and graduate students representing a variety of majors and tutoring experience levels. I was limited in time as the staff had a one-day training prior to the start of the semester and weekly one-hour meetings to continue training; therefore, very little time was allotted on the original training day for topics such as working with multilingual student writers. Instead, training was mostly spent on practical logistics, such as working on the scheduling software and how to open and conclude tutoring sessions. The information discussed in training inherently shows tutors where the value is placed. By neglecting any of our allotted time for discussions on working with English Language Learners, we as a Center were contributing to the lack of access provided to our multilingual student population. As Sarah Blazer (2015) noted, "Writing center staff education must be a primary focus of efforts to affirm in our practice the reality and value of linguistic diversity in our center" (2015, p. 19). Ultimately, our training material was

contributing to a lack of accessibility in our Writing Center without discussing the values of linguistic diversity. We could not continue to affirm the notion that tutoring can be digested into one cultural lens or one linguistic approach, occurring between two native English speakers.

Something had to change. It became apparent that the issue of lack of access for multilingual students did not stop with the Writing Center but extended across campus. International students at the institution had to submit proof of proficiency in English by submitting test scores from certain exams (Austin Peay State University English Language Proficiency, 2022). However, students came with a variety of language experiences and needed further support to successfully complete their courses. Much of the labor was being placed on the multilingual students themselves, including the tasks of translating material from English to their native languages, informing professors of their language diversity, making requests for additional time, seeking out support, and discovering what offices around campus could help them. It was not clear where they could turn for assistance or what types of support structures were already in place. We saw this as a possible opportunity to highlight the Writing Center's role in increasing multilingual students' access to not only writing resources but also campus support. We began asking: How could our Writing Center promote a culture of linguistic diversity and inclusivity? How can campus partnerships be cultivated to generate more visible support for multilingual students? How could the Writing Center provide more access to multilingual students, who seemed to not have other support structures across campus? To answer these questions, our priority became forming connections and listening to a variety of stakeholders.

Within the first few weeks of our Writing Center being open, it was clear we were limited in the types of students we could best assist. Furthermore, it became apparent there was not a clear direction of where multilingual student writers could receive support on campus. For many multilingual student writers, the Writing Center became the first stopping place to receive guidance and support. The Writing Center was a place where they could voice their concerns in an individual setting. As stated in *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*, "The foundation of writing center pedagogy—one-to-one instruction—is still a critical asset in the writing curriculum, but it is also labor—and intellectually—intensive" (Rafoth, 2015, p. 18). The emotional and intellectual labor fell on the tutoring staff to meet these needs, while the multilingual students who attended were also emotionally overwhelmed and did not receive the highest quality of writing support.

Methodology

This study was IRB-approved by our institution. Participants for this study were recruited through the use of the optional post-tutoring survey sent to each student's email address after the conclusion of their writing center session. The survey is sent to all students, undergraduate and graduate, who participate in a tutoring session in order to discover more about their experience. The survey asks all students questions about how they would rate the session and recommend the center on a Likert scale, rating with options including Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor; and Highly Likely, Likely, Unlikely, Not At All Likely.

Participants for this study were selected based on their responses to the question "What is your primary language?" If students selected that English is not their first language, their survey results were included in the data analysis. Based on completed surveys, a total of 13 survey results were analyzed.

The survey also asked students if they would like to be contacted for an optional follow-up interview for approximately 60 minutes. The students were then contacted via email, and ultimately three multilingual students decided to participate in the interview: two undergraduate, first-year students and one graduate student. We wanted to include a graduate student voice based on the calls from previous scholarship (Cirillo-McCarthy, 2016). In addition to hearing from multilingual students, I also conducted interviews with two Writing Center tutors who worked with multilingual students. The rationale for interviewing tutors was to understand how tutors perceived the pre-semester and weekly training preparations. The pre-semester training was one day and included guest speakers from across campus and time to practice tutoring strategies in mock sessions. The weekly recurring sessions lasted one hour and included a tutor-related reading followed by discussion.

Cultivating Access by Hearing from Tutors and Multilingual Students

In order to provide that high-quality writing support, our Center looked inward to see how tutors were responding to this need. We primarily focused on three key areas, as addressed by Blazer and Fallon (2020): knowledge (understanding students' experiences with language), attitudes (developing an open mind towards difference), and practice (making and applying meaning to tutoring sessions). Our staff sought feedback from multilingual students utilizing the Writing Center, analyzing post-tutor session survey responses and incorporating interviews.

Knowledge

Students come to the Writing Center for a variety of reasons. Many times, they have been sent by their professor; other times they are overwhelmed and need a supportive environment. For multilingual student writers, the reasons can overlap (Olson, 2013). In addition to the English language barrier, many of our first-generation students also lacked access to academic terminology and procedures. Therefore, our tutors became starting points to assist students in learning about the expectations of each assignment, genres of academic work, and even procedures such as visiting professors' office hours. David Sousa (2010) writes, "Researchers believe that, on average, ELLs may take two years to become fluent in interpersonal communications. Academic language, however, takes far longer—at least five to seven years" (p. 213). In addition to language barriers, the academic jargon was a further barrier to comprehension for many of our students. We needed to address both aspects to empower students to participate successfully at our institution.

Data gathered from the surveys and interviews will now be discussed as it pertains to the theme of knowledge. We have prioritized listening to our multilingual students who had attended writing center sessions. As one multilingual undergraduate student, John, noted, he first visited the Writing Center for assistance with a speaking presentation. John [pseudonym] explained, "My Communications course required a 5-minute speech explaining an issue we see in the world. I wanted to have help in creating my slides and practicing the speaking portion in order to feel more confident." Part of John's reasoning for attending the Writing Center session was to grow in his confidence before completing the assignment. Based on our focus on Blazer and Fallon's (2020) interpretation of knowledge, interviewing John allowed us to better understand his views towards developing and presenting research to his class.

John shared that he was anxious about how students in his course would perceive his use of vocabulary and pronunciation in sharing his research in a presentation style. While he felt capable of locating information on his research topic, he felt less confident in public speaking. He shared that he turned to the Writing Center in order to gain practice in a friendly setting. This information allowed us to equip tutors with the reminder to listen to each client and understand multilingual students want more than simply grammatical review. Based on interviews with our tutors, tutors perceived grammatical explanations as the most important aspect of working with multilingual students. However, John's experience showed this grammatical emphasis perception was not always the case.

Furthermore, Sandy, a multilingual and non-traditional student, first discovered the Writing Center during her introductory English course. This course incorporated literary theory and analysis of literature through various frameworks. The course included five major essays, each weighing a large percentage of the total grade. Sandy felt overwhelmed by the course. While visiting the library, she saw our Writing Center and was hopeful she could find support she was unable to find within the classroom setting.

When Sandy visited the Writing Center, her first session was with tutor Evelyn, a biology major in their second week of working as a tutor. The session mostly focused on interpreting the assignment's details. Evelyn assisted Sandy in learning about the literary theories she could choose from to frame her paper around.

In the session, Sandy showed frustration towards her assignment and understanding what was being asked. While we as a tutoring staff felt a lack of confidence in the service we could provide Sandy, she shared her own perspective about the Writing Center in her interview. She noted:

My professor forgets that I am an English Language Learner. Now I have to interpret these difficult literary assignments, too. I did not feel comfortable asking my professor for further help, so I found out about the Writing Center. I know that when I come here, at least I will have someone who listens and tries to help me do my best.

For Sandy, the Writing Center was a place where she felt heard. Even if the tutor struggled to understand or provide a clear explanation, Sandy did not feel negatively towards the Writing Center. She recognized the tutor was trying to listen, and for Sandy, that was what mattered when it came to returning for tutoring sessions throughout the semester.

As Director, Sandy sharing her experience illuminated a positive aspect of our Writing Center culture at large. We needed improvement in the quality of our multilingual training and knowledge of theoretical approaches; however, many of our standard training approaches discussed in the pre-semester tutoring training and recurring training sessions throughout the semester, such as listening, prioritizing the student's needs, balancing tutor/student talk time, and creating a welcoming environment for all students, were still working. These tutoring approaches were emphasized through readings, discussions, and evaluated in tutor observations conducted twice each semester. The fact that these approaches were working was a positive first step, as "These emotional responses and the underlying values and assumptions that inform them are central to an organization's culture" (Mattingly et al., 2020). We needed to continue cultivating appropriate emotional intelligence for our tutors to ensure access for our multilingual students.

Many of our tutors began seeing multilingual students make recurring appointments to work on their writing goals. It became apparent that their needs included more than grammatical assistance or understanding the concept of an assignment. For many of the students, they needed a place to turn for support with their emotions. Because their courses were directed at native speakers, students felt extra pressure to perfect their work and avoid judgments.

As one of our graduate tutors shared:

With the ELL students, I gained a bigger picture of factors that may be affecting them beyond the classroom. In one case, I had an ELL student who was troubled because he had to give a speech on a politically-charged topic. I could tell that he was feeling a lot of anxiety out of fear of judgment from classmates. He told me he was self-conscious because he was afraid they would pay more attention to things like his accent rather than what he had to say. When I looked over the assignment, it seemed from the syllabus that too much research was required. However, we spent a lot of time in our sessions looking up the most academic, scholarly sources possible; I think this was important to him because of that fear of judgment. The way he described his classroom environment also made me a little nervous, so I think that is why I went along with it.

Our multilingual students carried anxieties about how they would be perceived by the larger campus community. Granting students access to quality Writing Center tutoring sessions was a start. Yet until we could connect with the campus at large to provide support for these students in all avenues, our institution was failing them.

Attitudes

Our tutors came from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines. While we started with seven tutors total, we quickly began to grow after one year, reaching 17 tutors, 10 undergraduates and seven graduate students. Tutors came from a variety of disciplines, with majors including English, Counseling, Communications, Radiography, French, History, Biology, Classics, and Criminal Justice. Tutors' experience levels ranged, with a few returning tutors from the previous semester and the remaining tutors in their first semester of tutoring. With experience levels widely ranging, tutors did not have much experience (if any) working with multilingual writers. As Sousa (2010) notes, "For mainstream content teachers without a background in English as a Second

Language instruction, determining the appropriate teaching methods and goals for these students poses a significant and unique challenge” (p. 204). Our tutors felt overwhelmed and unsure of how to best support this student body.

Tutors were required to attend a one-day training prior to the start of the semester, with recurring weekly training sessions. Because of the diversity of tutors, including experience levels, disciplines of study, and familiarity with campus, the trainings prioritized more pragmatic topics instead of theory-based discussion. Students could book thirty-minute to one-hour-long tutoring sessions, with the option of booking recurring appointments with the same tutor each week.

As students began learning about the Writing Center and booking appointments, issues began to emerge. While our staff numbers had grown, we still had limited tutor availability, with about two tutors available per hour. Furthermore, it became apparent that our tutoring staff was not prepared to work with multilingual writers. This came back to the lack of adequate training on this topic. One student tutor, an undergraduate Biology major, Evelyn, noted:

When I had my first tutor session with a multilingual student, it was apparent how little guidance the student had prior to finding the Writing Center. The student appeared overwhelmed, frustrated, and confused at the assignment prompt. We spent most of our first session reviewing vocabulary in order to best understand what the assignment was asking, as it was only provided in English. I kept referring to Dictionary definitions and using Google translate to help the student make sense of the assignment details and comprehend its purpose. I felt like I was not connecting with the student and was letting them down. I could sense they needed help, and I was the first place they had turned.

After this session, Evelyn shared with the Director her concerns about the lack of tutor training and lack of experience working with multilingual writers. Evelyn needed the following: the knowledge of learning from multilingual students’ language experiences; the attitude of seeing the rich skills these students bring and utilize in their own lives and how they can be applied to successfully complete a writing task; and finally, the practice of applying best tutoring practices of empowering the student while recognizing patterns of improvement in their writing. Evelyn had no experience tutoring multilingual students before and felt disappointed that the student left with no work to show from their session.

The student also wanted to set up recurring sessions in the Writing Center for support in her English class. Evelyn voiced she did not know how to continue working

with this student in order to provide high-quality tutoring. Our Writing Center culture had to shift to being open to differences in multilingual students' needs. We needed to seek out adequate practices to best prepare tutors and allow them to connect with the multilingual students.

Practice

We began observations of multilingual student tutoring sessions. I had the most experience working with multilingual students, so tutors took turns observing these sessions and holding debriefing meetings in order to learn best concepts and practices. In addition to adequately training our tutors, part of our work centered on the campus culture at large. Our tutoring staff began to see patterns with multilingual students coming to the Writing Center. Based on responses to our in-take tutor survey, most students found us for one of two reasons: either they felt overwhelmed and did not know where else to turn for individualized support, or their professor made a request that they visit the Writing Center because of their level of English language skills displayed in their paper writing. In both situations, students who visited the Writing Center held a lot of emotions, including shame, anxiety, overwhelm, confusion, and ultimately hope for assistance. Sometimes these emotions were directed at tutors in different ways, displayed as frustration, sadness, closing off, or other displays. These students were facing extreme challenges and needed someone to listen and care.

Instead of professors sending multilingual students to the Writing Center to “fix” their errors, we wanted to create a culture of embracing “a more multicultural and multilingual worldview” in our work with multilingual writers (Bailey, 2012, p. 1). It was apparent that many professors were overworked and unable to provide student writing individual attention. Somehow multilingual student writers were placed in sections of English courses with no assistance in English language learning. Instead of turning to their professors who were teaching multiple sections, students began seeking out help from the Writing Center.

Another multilingual student, Katherine, shared about her experiences across campus. She needed a place where she could ask questions, receive feedback, and find support. In her interview, she stated:

For my History exam, I needed more time to translate the questions from English to Spanish in order to fully comprehend what they were asking. When I asked my History professor for more time, they recommended I visit the Office of Disability Studies for translation support. The Office of Disability

Studies was not able to assist me. When a classmate mentioned the Writing Center, I decided to come and see if I could find assistance here.

How could we best support students like Katherine? For us, the answer was empowering students by highlighting the strengths they already carried. If students brought a paper marked by their professor with grammatical errors, we first sought out to find the positives of their writing. Was the storytelling strong? Was the paper following assignment expectations? We then moved into points of confusion and walked through the original assignment prompt together in order to remove any barriers of confusion. Models and examples became critical in our work as well; by referring students to samples of U.S. academic writing within their specific discipline, we could start on a clearer path to work through ideas together. Finally, in-session writing time became important to ensure students felt confident moving forward.

Findings

The goal of this study was to discover if multilingual students indicated less satisfaction in their tutoring sessions than native English-speaking students. Based on the Likert scale rankings in the post-tutor surveys, multilingual students did not feel less satisfied in tutoring sessions than native English speakers. Out of 13 surveys, nine participants indicated they would rate their tutoring session as “Excellent” and four participants indicated they would rate their tutoring session as “Good.” However, the interviews revealed ways to improve our services and allow multilingual students more opportunities to connect and practice writing and speaking skills in a low-stakes environment.

Ultimately, this study discovered that multilingual students at our institution felt emotionally supported in the Writing Center. Some of the comments gathered from student responses to the survey included the following:

[Tutor name] helped me a lot with my paper. I am from the Spanish language and I have problems with grammar and structure in English. [Tutor name] was really helpful to me.

Another multilingual student shared:

I think this service is very helpful for students, even more for international students like me. I really appreciate this help. Thanks.

The comments left on the surveys were all positive in nature, discussing more of the beneficial nature of support in the Writing Center. The comments encouraged our Writing Center team to reflect on the current strengths of tutoring sessions through the use of emotional support.

Improvements to Practice

Through interviews conducted with both multilingual students and tutors, we discovered areas of improvement as well as strengths that students appreciated. Areas of improvement based on the interviews included more technical aspects, which can be improved upon in our tutor training. These aspects include more detailed explanations as to grammatical changes and why they were suggested.

We also learned that hosting events such as a Cross-Cultural Conversation hour would be helpful in providing students opportunities to connect and grow in their conversation and public speaking skills. Furthermore, tutors have utilized model texts in sessions; the examples help show students more clear expectations and provide starting places for conversation in tutoring sessions.

In the future, I plan to revamp our post-tutor survey questions to include more room for students to indicate areas of concern. The Likert scale ranking questions do not necessarily give students the opportunity to share improvement practices. We would also like to continue building on this study and recruit more participants, especially multilingual graduate students, to participate in surveys and especially the interview process.

As themed around this journal issue, providing access for multilingual student writers is about empowerment and opportunities for enriching experiences to learn. For our Writing Center, the goal shifted to developing relationships in order to listen to and support multilingual students.

Strategies for Supporting Multilingual Writers

We want to ensure that multilingual students know they are welcomed and will be well supported in our Writing Center. Much of this inclusive nature begins with the language we use to describe and promote our services. While prior to these changes our website did not include any information on multilingual student resources or attending a tutoring session as a multilingual student, we worked on highlighting this student population through our web section, newsletter, and social media accounts.

We also raised our own awareness of multilingual writing as a tutoring staff. We learned about other on-campus programs and resources supporting multilingual students. This knowledge allowed us to refer multilingual students we tutored to more resources, thus improving their access to not only the Writing Center but also support around campus.

As previously mentioned, our tutor-focus shifted to three key areas, as addressed by Blazer and Fallon (2020): knowledge (understanding students' experiences with language); attitudes (developing an open mind towards difference); and practice (making and applying meaning to tutoring sessions). Framing our tutor training around these concepts ensured that tutors were building a foundation of inclusive tutoring and consideration of the student's needs.

Knowledge

While we previously mentioned focusing on various stakeholders, our focus on knowledge shifted to tutor training. Our goal was to make our Writing Center tutors ambassadors of the new knowledge. Because of this gap in training and preparation, our group trainings (weekly one-hour trainings and a one-day pre-semester training) included guest speakers specializing in the area of multilingual student writers in order to improve our tutoring practices to best support these students. This topic took priority since its neglect in our fall training revealed deep-rooted cracks in our overall approach to inclusivity.

Our Center invited a guest speaker to share their experiences on best practices for tutoring multilingual students. The speaker holds a degree in Teaching English as a Second Language, is a virtual ESL instructor for an Adult Education Center, and is a multilingual speaker herself. She agreed to lead a five-week training series to share information, theories, and practices for providing more access to multilingual student writers. These sessions occurred on Zoom with the goal that tutors could ask questions, learn new concepts, and grow as tutors of multilingual student writers. The learning outcomes of the workshops included the following: learning about the learning process of students whose first language is not English, understanding the nature of bilingualism and biliteracy, understanding some structural differences between students' first language and second language, identifying key factors that play a role in students' academic performance in writing, and learning about strategies to help students with their writing skills. Terms such as English Language Learner, second-language acquisition, L1, L2, and language proficiency were defined. One of the most effective ways our tutors gained knowledge came from guiding prompts

provided by our guest speaker that allowed them to learn new concepts to best serve multilingual students in tutoring sessions. For example, prompts asked: “How can your student’s first language structure be used as a teaching strategy?” and “How did the information from today’s session impact me as a tutor regarding working with ELLs?”

One of our undergraduate tutors, who majored in Radiology, noted:

If a student has consistent errors in their writing, then as a tutor, I can look at the structure of their first language. This will help tutors understand why the errors are continuously repeated throughout the writing. This also provides an opportunity to focus on rules that are practiced in their second language compared with rules that are not present in their first language.

Our tutors began to expand their understanding of linguistic diversity and learn approaches that could help them grow more confident in their own strategies. As shown with Evelyn, many of our tutors deeply cared for these students, but did not have the tools or resources to provide the highest quality tutoring. Furthermore, access to this information allowed tutors to grow in their own self-confidence and abilities. These trainings and readings became important steps for building our tutor knowledge around linguistic diversity.

Attitudes

Through training tutors, we sought to provide a variety of support, from more practical and individualized tutor strategies, to creating a more supportive culture of empathy and support towards multilingual student writers. From concepts such as being culturally responsive, to more practical shifts such as using collective pronouns during a tutoring session such as: “Let’s find out together” or “We might not know...,” there are a variety of strategies for tutors to utilize when it comes to ensuring the student feels supported and not alone. Since we had seen from previous experiences that some multilingual students who visited the Writing Center did not feel they had other forms of support across campus, it was crucial that we as a Writing Center staff showed empathy and care in order to ensure these students wanted to return.

Based on our guest speakers, we as a staff also grew in our knowledge of cultural differences and educational experiences. For example, we discussed how the writing process as taught in the United States is not taught globally. Expectations set by professors in writing courses, such as submitting outlines, drafts, and having conferences, may feel uncomfortable to multilingual students. For this reason, our

staff was encouraged to use guiding questions, including: What are the steps involved in your writing process? Why are they important? When can they be used? How can they be used?

Based on interviews, we developed the concept of hosting weekly Culture and Conversation hours, featuring a topic and time for practicing English-speaking and writing skills in a welcoming environment with free food. Our Center also asked for more funding to increase our campus presence in places such as the Latino Community Resource Center, and Adult and Nontraditional Student Center to meet many of our multilingual students in more spaces they were attending.

Practice

Our revised spring training included moments of practical reflection and application. With our increased tutor numbers, we no longer had to worry about understaffing. Tutors were required to complete “shadowing” sessions where new tutors trained under returning tutors to watch tutor sessions with a variety of student needs. Our environment shifted to more collaborative learning, connecting across tutors and sharing ideas together. Instead of, “I do not feel adequate to work with this multilingual student,” our mindset became more community-based and replaced with the idea of, “We are promoting an inclusive learning environment for all students together.”

Our Center also implemented de-briefing sessions with tutors to understand how things were going after working with multilingual students. In addition to reviewing appointment forms in advance to track patterns of needs for our multilingual students, we analyzed post-tutor session client report forms to see how multilingual students felt about the sessions, if they were likely to return, or had any follow-up feedback. Often time spent with prewriting or drafting in English in the Writing Center allowed for moral support and confidence-building.

The Writing Center cannot best serve students if we fail to connect with other resources across campus and learn what expectations there are for multilingual students. For our spring training day, we invited a guest speaker from our English Language Institute to speak about how to best support this student population in our tutoring sessions. The speaker also spoke about what further campus resources multilingual students do and do not have access to. This collaboration allowed our staff the opportunity to learn more and have more answers when multilingual students asked for further support.

Our Center created a more formal Writing Center Tutor Guide Handbook, with a dedicated section for multilingual student writers. Our webpage grew to incorporate more multilingual-based resources, including handouts featuring certain key areas or topics. Many of these resources were created upon request of our multilingual students, such as understanding the writing process, verb tense, article usage, and more. These allowed students to reference them conveniently on their own time or for tutors to quickly turn to during sessions. Another key area of improving the Writing Center's access to multilingual students includes the hiring of multilingual students to work as tutors within our Center, a goal we are continuing to build on.

Conclusion

This study sought to discover multilingual students' perception of the Writing Center, as well as tutors' confidence in tutoring multilingual students. The survey results from multilingual students showed positive Writing Center experiences. Upon conducting interviews, we learned more about areas we were already doing well, including emotional support, and areas we could improve in, such as more hands-on writing time in sessions and grammatical explanations.

The goal of this article is to provide examples and ideas for increasing support of multilingual writers to those in administrative positions in tutoring and writing programs. The first step is learning from the students. In our case, we first discovered what campus resources currently existed for our multilingual student population, including the English Language Institute and Latino Community Resource Center. We then sought out possible gaps in access for multilingual students, specifically through the lens of writing support. This led us to the questions: How are multilingual students turned away from our Center, inherently or symbolically? How can those barriers be removed? We started with improved tutor training, to raise knowledge for our tutors of the various cultural perspectives and writing styles our students may bring. Through more purposeful activities, we developed more open attitudes and confidence in welcoming multilingual students. Finally, we focused on improved practice by making and applying meaning to tutoring sessions; this raised multilingual students' access through the use of listening, debriefing after sessions, and including more opportunities across campus for further support, such as events tailored to the needs of multilingual students and opportunities to connect and share.

Based on our experiences, we recommend any writing center team seeking to improve multilingual students' access first seek feedback from the students around them, especially tutors and multilingual students themselves. The use of surveys or

focus group interviews can allow better insight into how accessible they find the Writing Center and what improvements could be made. Empowerment comes from not only being heard, but being given opportunities to create or enhance strategies already in place. Because tutors are hyper aware of the gaps of our services, they should be turned to for making decisions by the Director. When our tutor Evelyn admitted concern for the quality of our tutoring services for multilingual writers, it served as a motivation to face the problem and seek solutions.

Final Reflection

Our progress is steadily improving in providing more writing center access to our multilingual student population. Self-reflection on individual tutoring sessions is crucial in becoming more inclusive. In order to develop an inclusive space accessible to all students, we must first consider ways we are preventing access and to what populations. For our Center, this revamp started with a reboot of our tutor training, as well as representation among multilingual writers. Access takes the form of tutor availability across campus in areas such as our Latino Community Resource Center, hosting Cultural Conversation hours where students can practice their English-speaking skills and learn from one another, and providing more resources geared towards multilingual students on our website and in the Center. However, there is much room to grow. Our next goals focus on continuing to increase our training and resources available to multilingual students, developing specific multilingual student writer workshops, and hiring multilingual student writers as Writing Center tutors.

Our goal as an academic support service is to empower students of all backgrounds, including multilingual students. Prior to our work on improving access to multilingual students, our Writing Center was not providing clear access for this population. We had to pause and listen to what members of our multilingual student population were sharing about their experiences as students and writers. Our Writing Center strives to lead the way for continued improvement in access for this student population. At our university, the mission statement notes improving support for cultivating an inclusive campus that extends globally, yet our academic support services needed improvement to meet this goal. In a deeper sense, our role in the Writing Center is not only to prepare tutors and support multilingual student writers, but to be a place of advocating for a larger campus cultural shift altogether

References

- Austin Peay State University English Language Proficiency. (2017).
<https://www.apsu.edu/international/international-undergraduate-admission/english-language-proficiency.php>
- Austin Peay State University Graduation Rate Report. (2022).
<https://www.apsu.edu/international/admissions/english-language-proficiency.php>
- Bailey, S. (2012). Tutor handbooks: Heuristic texts for negotiating difference in a globalized world. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, 9(2), 1-8.
<http://praxis.uwc.utexas.edu/index.php/praxis/article/view/50/html>
- Blazer, S. (2015). Twenty-first century writing center staff education: Teaching and learning towards inclusive and productive everyday practice. *The Writing Center Journal*, 35(1), 17–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43673618>
- Blazer, S., and Brian Fallon. (2020). Changing conditions for multilingual writers. *Composition Forum*, 44.
<https://compositionforum.com/issue/44/changing-conditions.php>
- Cirillo-McCarthy, E., Del Russo, C., & Leahy, E. (2016). “We don’t do that here”: Calling out deficit discourses in the writing center to reframe multilingual graduate support. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, 14(1).
<https://www.praxisuwc.com/cirillomccarty-141>
- Griffin, B. (2018). *Secondary and postsecondary teachers’ perceptions of ESL students’ barriers to college graduation* (Publication No. 10976955). [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2150091188>
- Mattingly, M., Helakoski, C., Lundberg, C., and Walz, K. (2020). Cultivating an emotionally intelligent writing center culture online. In G.N. Giaimo et al (Eds.), *Wellness and Care in Writing Center Work*. PressBooks.
- Metro Language Access Report. Metro Human Relations Commission. (2017, February).
<https://filetransfer.nashville.gov/portals/0/sitecontent/Human%20Realations%20Commission/docs/publications/MetroLanguageAccessStudy.pdf>
- Olson, B. (2013). Rethinking our work with multilingual writers: The ethics and responsibility of language teaching in the writing center. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, 10(2). <http://www.praxisuwc.com/olson-102>.
- Phillips, T. (2017). Shifting supports for shifting identities: Meeting the needs of multilingual graduate writers. *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, 14(3).
<https://www.praxisuwc.com/talinn-phillips-143>

Rafoth, B. (2015). *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*. University Press of Colorado.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt128801f>

Sousa, D.A. (2010). *How the ELL Brain Learns*. SAGE Publications.

Tennessee Department of Education Report Card. (2021, June). State of Tennessee.

Tennessee Department of Education.

<http://reportcard.tnedu.gov/state/0/profile>

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Students

Why do you seek out tutoring from the Writing Center?

According to your post-tutoring survey results, you marked _____ for how you would rate your tutoring session. What contributed to your choice?

According to your post-tutoring survey results, you marked you would/would not return to the Writing Center. What contributed to your choice?

According to your post-tutoring survey results, you left the following comment “_____.” What contributed to your choice?

How did you discover the Writing Center?

How often do you frequent the Writing Center?

What is a positive aspect of your Writing Center experience?

What is an area that could be improved in your Writing Center experience?

What else would you like to share about your experiences in the Writing Center?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Tutors

How comfortable are you in tutoring multilingual students during Writing Center sessions?

Can you describe a recent tutoring session where you felt confident in your tutoring abilities?

What knowledge do you feel less familiar with when it comes to English language learning?

How did you feel the tutor training session on working with multilingual students went (featuring our guest speaker)? What did you learn from it?

How could we improve to make you feel more prepared/supported in working with multilingual students?

About the Author

Allie Johnston, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of English in the Languages and Literature Department at Austin Peay State University, where she teaches composition and rhetoric courses. She also serves as the university's first Writing Center Director. Her goal is to expand the Writing Center to better serve all student populations across disciplines while providing tutors with professionalization opportunities. Her research focuses on writing center studies and multimodal curriculum in first-year writing programs.

Open Words: Access and English Studies

Vol. 15, no. 1 (2023): pages 163–184.

DOI: 10.37514/OPW-J.2023.15.1.08

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online)

<https://wac.colostate.edu/openwords/>

Open Words: Access and English Studies is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal, published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University and Georgia Southern University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs). ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online). Copyright © 1997-2019 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site's authors, developers, and contributors.