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Using Linguistics and Proxemics to Address the Challenges of Consulting Non-Native Speakers

Jack Cantey, Curt Hemsoth, and Teresa Bárcenas
Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW)
International Student Enrollment in U.S. Universities and Colleges, 1952 to Present

IPFW Writing Center Data (2013)

3770 total visits from 1313 individual writers

3190 (84.6%) visits w/ recorded primary language of writer

1184 (37.1%) non-unique visits by writers w/ primary language other than English

33 primary languages other than English recorded
Ten Most Common Primary Languages of NNS Writers, IPFW Writing Center (2013)
(Non-unique Visits)
Overview

➢ Provide context about NNS in Writing Center literature for last 20 years.

➢ Provide a linguistic insight into sociocultural elements that we may be overlooking in Writing Center theory when consulting ESL/NNS writers.

➢ Provide ideas shaped by the field of proxemics that we might be overlooking in Writing Center theory in terms of consulting our NNS writers.

➢ Correlate these contexts to draw potential questions on how our Writing Centers of the future need to shift focus when consulting NNS of English.
Categories: International student; Refugee or resident student; 2nd generation student

Concerns: mechanics; organization; language

“Be more direct than when working with native speakers, but don't silence the NNS writer by dominating talk time and not genuinely listening.”

“[S]uccessful assistance to ESL writers may involve more intervention in their writing processes than we consider appropriate with native-speaking writers” (101).

“[C]ollaborative writing and conference teaching do work for these writers in some important ways,” such as “the process of verbalizing an idea . . . and the act of sketching a structure” (102).

Too often, consultants “quickly fall into the role of healer of sick or injured drafts” (3).

Recommends using a recursive brainstorming method with NNS writers.

A three-part organization for consultations with NNS writers:

1. “Re-interpreting the assignment”
2. “Shaping a dialogue around key words that are repeated throughout the drafts”
3. “Ordering the ESL writer’s responses” (3)
Doug Enders (2013)

Problem: NNS writers coming to writing center too late in process

Solution: *Idea Check Procedure*

Collaboratively devised by Shenandoah U. ESL program and Writing Center

1\textsuperscript{st} visit (required): consultation focuses on writer’s outline

2\textsuperscript{nd} visit (required): AKA the “First Draft Check,” focuses on high-order concerns

3\textsuperscript{rd} visit (optional): AKA the “Revision Draft Check,” focuses on revisions for final draft (6)

(you) Say what (to me)?! 

Linguistic challenges to NNS writers
John lost his pants.
John seems to know the answer.
The themes for the Hearings will be based on the comprehensive report of the Secretary-General contained in document A/59/2005 and the clusters defined therein.
Identifying linguistic challenges

Localized challenges:

Limited vocabulary, use of inflectional morphology, etc.

These errors are often difficult to correct due to interference from their L1 and therefore require understanding of why they are making the mistake.

*IOW*: we may be wasting too much of the valuable consulting time we have with a NNS writer by trying to address these concerns repeatedly and actually doing them a disservice!
Identifying linguistics challenges

Lexical Challenges:

Chinese – head-final modification such as relative clauses, postpositions, non-inflected count nouns (Sun, 2006)

*Many student receive good grade who program participated in.

Many students who participated in the program received better grades.

Hindi/Urdu – head-final modification, broader semantic encoding, more derivational markers, postpositions, likely to have British/Indian-English L2 (Davison, 1999).

*I must go to the store for the buying of not enough dinners.

I have to go to the store to buy TV dinners, but I don’t have enough money.
Identifying linguistics challenges

Syntax continued...

Arabic – morphosyntactic verb structure, sometimes VSO structures, phonological misconstructions (Soltan, 2011; Ryan and Meara, 1991)

*So she made me to write this paper and it was trouble in finding peer rebuked sources.
I have to write this paper, and I am having trouble finding peer-reviewed sources.

When a writer is making these errors throughout a paper and you aren’t aware of these lexical challenges, how can you find “systematic errors” to focus on?
Identifying linguistic challenges

Global challenges:

- Elements of style
  - Conflicts between MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.
- Elements of rhetorical discourse
  - Cohesion – identified by Halliday and Hasan (1976)
Students who acquire second languages do so (1) in many social contexts. For example, they (2) may learn L2s (3) in formal classrooms, or [ ] (4) in informal interaction with native speakers. Language learners (5) may profit from either setting (6), but (7) of course (8) not all (9) will have equal success. In the end (10), motivation as well as (11) aptitude and (12) opportunity is a critical variable (13). (Saville-Troike 152)

Social mediation

Linguistic challenges often stem from a need for social mediation (Chaiklin, 2003; Hall, 2007)

- Varying level of access to learning community
- Varying level of mediation from experts and peers

Often, due to lack of mediation, L2 input often significantly exceeds the limits of acquired knowledge and understanding becomes fragmentary

- L2 learners have need for *top-down processing* that utilizes prior knowledge of content, social context, and culture to provide *scaffolding* for integrating new information
How we can become social mediators!

Providing scaffolding (Stone, 1998; Hall, 2007)

- Using nonverbal gestures, intonation and pauses, and positive error correction (“yes” - then restate what was said/written into proper form)

- Generating general models using relatable content, context, and cultural references rather than resorting to directive consultation

- Being patient, understanding, empathetic, and supportive!
Proxemics and you!

How understanding the cultural variance in proxemics can help you consult with NNS writers.
Non-verbal communication represents two-thirds of all communication.
Types of Non-Verbal Communication

Facial Expression
Gestures
Paralinguistics
Body Language and Posture
Eye Gaze
Haptics
Appearance
Proxemics

All of these can be incorporated when working with non-native English writers…

…but one that has not been explored to the greatest extent is the study of proxemics.
Introduction to Proxemics

Proxemics refers to the perception and use of personal and interpersonal space, which varies from culture to culture (Bulusu, 1998).
Introduction to Proxemics

Hall (1974) classified various cultures as either high or low-context cultures.

In a **high-context culture**, one rarely communicates information about procedure.

In a **low-context culture**, information abounds, procedures are explicitly explained, and expectations are frequently discussed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low</th>
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<th>High</th>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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Hall (1974) states that whenever two people of different cultures interact, each uses his/her own culture's criteria to interpret the relationship, the activity, or the emotions involved.

(as cited in Bulusu, 1998)
Multiple Factors in Proxemics

Culture
Gender
Age
Personality
Relation

(Høgh-Olesen, 2008)
E.T. Hall: Renowned Theorist in the Study of Proxemics

*Infracultural behaviors* (such as territoriality and crowding responses)

- The *precultural level*: species-specific physiological make-up
- The *microcultural level*: programmed responses made by kin

*American ethnic groups*

- Might still maintain the proxemic rule of their ethnic background

(Hall, 1966:2)
The Factor of Culture

When speaking their native languages:

Asian individuals will sit farther apart than Hispanic individuals, with Americans at
an intermediate distance

Females will sit closer than males

When speaking English:

Individuals will more closely approximate American conversational distance
than when speaking their native languages

(Sussman & Rosenfeld, 1982)
Follow the writer’s nonverbal cues—if you are not sure where his or her comfort level lies, simply ask (Newland, 2008).

Writing Center visitations affect non-native English speaking students positively in their writing (Williams, Takaku & Bauman, 2006).
Proxemics and the Writing Center

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Proxemics and the Writing Center: Analyzing the IPFW Writing Center

HIGH-CONTEXT VS. LOW-CONTEXT CULTURES

Low Context
   Northern European and Swiss

Medium-Low
   Anglo-American male and female

Medium
   Southern European and Middle Eastern

High
   Asian, American Indian, Hispanic, and African American

WRITING CENTER VISITS (2013)

Total Visits: 3770
Total Students: 1313
3770 ÷ 1313 = 2.87 visits per student

Total Visits with Primary Language Other Than English: 1184
Non-Native English Speakers make 37.12% of Total Visits
Top Ten Non-English Primary Languages (2013)

Non-Unique Visits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burmese</td>
<td>113</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>109</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urdu</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Representation formatted to highlight context level of cultures*
Proxemics and the Writing Center

Non-Native English Speakers in IPFW Writing Center (2013)

- Medium Context: 33%
- High Context: 67%
Proxemics and the Writing Center: Analyzing Our Writing Center and Yours

IPFW Writing Center

Top Ten Non-Native English Speaking Visiting Writers
- 67% come from High Context Cultures
- 33% come from Medium Context Cultures

Writing Center Consultants
- Mostly come from Anglo-American culture
- Which means, Low to Medium-Low Context Cultures

What about your Writing Center?
What do these results demonstrate to us?

Both consultant’s and writer’s cultural background affects consultation results.

Cultural knowledge of our writers, including proxemics norms, helps us adapt.

Format a better consulting location.
Conclusions

- Learning to effectively consult with NNS writers is vital to the shifting demographic of our University’s writing centers.

- Consultations with NNS writers present different challenges than other consultations.

- However, the nature of these challenges also differs from writer to writer.

- These differences arise from linguistic diversity, varying access to social mediators, and conflicting nonverbal cultural expectations.