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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Professor Kim O'Neil for her support and guidance in the completion of my research project.

# English Language Learners at the University of Illinois at Chicago Writing Center

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## **Abstract**

My experience tutoring at the UIC Writing Center has opened my eyes to the various obstacles that writers face, in particular writers who are English Language Learners (ELL). This inspired me to establish a qualitative research project investigating how the Writing Center can best support ELL writers not only in learning grammar and/or culturally specific writing conventions but also with the discrimination and stigmatization that they often face based on their not-yet-developed knowledge of Standard American English. The research question explored was: What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of a multilingual tutor working with an ELL writer in a peer tutoring session at the UIC Writing Center? The research method applied was a literature review, as well as interviews with and surveys given to participants including, UIC Writing Center Tutors and writers (both native English speakers and ELL) as well as TESOL teachers and scholars. The research results suggested several benefits to multilingual tutors for ELL writers, including shared experiences from language learning and overcoming language obstacles, similar cultural insight, and the establishment of a sense of commonality. The results from the surveys and interviews displayed that certain disadvantages can be overcome through equal efforts by the writer and tutor. The research implications ultimately are that it is immensely important to make all tutors, not solely multilingual tutors, approach ELL writers in an empathetic, understanding and non-stigmatizing manner.

*Keywords:* English Language Learner(s), ELL, Writing Center, Tutor, Writer, ELL Tutor, ELL Writer, Multilingual Tutor, Standard American English, Peer Tutoring Session, Discrimination, Stigmatization, Multilingual

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## **Introduction**

Gloria Anzaldua (2012, n.p.) said, “as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.” Her words resonated immensely with my role as a tutor in the University of Illinois at Chicago [UIC] Writing Center. My experience working at the UIC Writing Center has opened my eyes to the various obstacles that we all face. Some view those who come to the writing center as individuals struggling with a certain topic, subject or piece of writing, yet I find all these individuals to be tremendously courageous with a strong will and desire to develop in a certain area. I especially enjoy the challenge of working with English Language Learner (ELL) writers, who come into the writing center with various challenges, many of which are not recognized instantly and don’t involve writing. ELL Writers do not only face challenges in learning grammar and culturally specific writing conventions, but also face discrimination and stigmatization from their not yet developed knowledge of standard American English. One day whilst at the UIC Writing Center, I had the opportunity to work with a writer who came in to discuss a paper for their English 160 Course – Academic Writing I: Writing in Academic and Public Contexts. A few minutes into our conversation, I discovered that my writer spoke Polish, a language that I also speak. In the moment, I got the idea to ask my writer if she would prefer if we discussed the paper in Polish as opposed to English. The writer exclaimed that she would

really like this and further explained that, although her English was not bad, she would be more comfortable as well as be able to understand more if we used Polish. I was intrigued by what I noticed. This observation led me towards the research question: What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of a multilingual tutor working with an ELL writer in a peer tutoring session at the UIC Writing Center?

## **Methods**

To begin, I conducted a literature review to study the topic of ELL Writers working with multilingual tutors who are non-native English-speakers in Writing Centers. Bruce and Rafoth (2016) in their book *Tutoring Second Language Writers* emphasized that there are many similarities between tutors tutoring writers who do not identify as ELL and tutors tutoring writers who do identify as ELL; although there are differences at the surface level, if one looks beyond this, an array of similarities can be discovered. Tutors that work with multilingual writers, the authors state, “have a good understanding of reflective thinking in relation to language; there is actually a lot to be known about language, the way in which people use it, but also themselves experience it” (Bruce & Rafoth, 2016, p. 1). The authors suggest that these tutors understand the reflective process and reflective thinking that multilingual writers undergo. To these multilingual writers working with the tutor is a reflective experience. An experience where in which the writer has to think and reflect in multiple languages prior to communicating in one language to the tutor. A peer reviewed scholarly article revealed that, “While ESL writers are as intelligent as any other writer, they are limited in their expression of this intelligence by their unfamiliarity with standard American English” (Szpara, 1994, p. 1). Szpara (1994) addresses how there are many tutors involved within the writing center, and, although each may not identify as an English as a Second Language (ESL) student, each tutor does need to be comfortable with and

capable of, tutoring writers who are ESL students. Rafoth (2015) in the scholarly book *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*, provided insight into the vast quantity of students within higher educational institutions who are international students. He states that, “this number will only continue to increase within the United States, because of this ongoing heightening of the number of international students, it is immensely vital the author emphasizes that on campus resources such as the Writing Center have students that are multilingual as opposed to solely monolingual” (Rafoth, 2015, p.1). However, my review of the existing literature revealed a gap: I could not find any studies specifically exploring the particular advantages and disadvantages of ELL writers working with multilingual tutors who are non-native English speakers. This gap encouraged me to conduct my own research project. I conducted four 1:1 interviews with ELL Writers in the UIC Writing Center and two large focus group interviews with tutors in the UIC Writing Center who identified as multilingual and non-native English speakers (tutors who spoke a different heritage language at home, and learned ESL at some point in their schooling).

## **Results**

I found that there are many advantages ELL writers have when working with multilingual tutors who are non-native English speakers, many of which are social and emotional advantages. It came to light that these multilingual tutors can better understand and empathize with ELL writers than non-multilingual tutors. This was determined from the words an ELL writer, who chose to remain anonymous, expressed, “I felt accepted, comfortable and safe subsequent to working with an ELL tutor” (ELL Writer, 2017). When asked further to describe why, the ELL writer expressed that with an ELL tutor [or a tutor who was at one-point ELL] who shared their heritage language they were able to, “speak the same language and the chances that they could understand each other’s ideas, thoughts, and points would occur easily” (ELL Writer, 2017).

Thus, this led to my belief that ELL writers working with multilingual tutors who are non-native English speakers, could avoid stigma and implicit biases that they might otherwise encounter when working with a tutor who is a monolingual standard American English speaker. The idea that ELL writers working with multilingual tutors who are non-native English speakers could avoid stigma and implicit biases that they might otherwise encounter when working with a tutor who is a monolingual standard American English speaker, led me to question and ask writers during interviews: “Did they ever feel oppressed by the standard American English?” The ELL writer said that, “maybe not completely oppressed, but sometimes I feel as if the way I talk is wrong because of standard American English,” (ELL Writer, 2017). This writer also expressed, “I fear speaking in class or approaching the professor out of fear that the students in the class or that the professor, would not understand me” (ELL Writer, 2017). Hearing these words made me further consider the implicit biases and obstacles that ELL writers face inside and outside of the UIC Writing Center. When exploring this further, an ELL writer, who also chose to remain anonymous expressed that, “being an ELL writer can make one feel like an outsider at school; since classes are taught in English when you struggle you are hesitant to ask for help” (ELL Writer 2, 2017). This statement encompasses this sense of fear that many ELL writers experience, a fear that has the potential of impacting their academic success. Another ELL writer, when asked how they balance the academic standard in the United States, expressed that, “many times ELL writers are thrown into competitive academic fields and studies that they are not well prepared for, which can inhibit their ability to succeed” (ELL Writer 3, 2017). The obstacles that these ELL writers face do not solely exist in the writing center, but move so far as existing in each and every classroom that the ELL writer resides in which begs the question, what steps are being taken in reference to this and how can this be solved? In relation to the

writing center when asked what would help, an ELL writer supported the idea of, “including an option on the writing center form where one can choose the language that one speaks in with their tutor during the tutoring session” (ELL Writer 4, 2017). ELL Tutors in a group interview to the same question expressed that, “it is vital to be patient, empathetic and understanding, as this type of attitude can greatly impact a tutoring session” (Group Interview, 2017). Being cognizant of one’s approach towards their writer can offer a solution to the potential obstacles that the writer may face during the session.

### **Discussion**

The phenomena of implicit bias and obstacles that ELL writers face emphasize the need and importance of tutors engaging with their writers, in order to familiarize themselves with the type of writer they are working with, to ultimately, understand what the needs of the writer are. Reflecting on and understanding biases and obstacles will allow for tutors to genuinely know their writer(s) and as a result of this, they will have the opportunity to empower their writers; empowerment these writers will carry with them even after they leave the Writing Center. Additionally, being present, empathetic and willing to provide a writer with the help they need, will contribute to a tutor’s ability to successfully identify the obstacles and biases their writer may face. I learned that some advantages include, shared experiences from language learning and overcoming language obstacles, a similar cultural insight resultant from the sharing of the sense of being new to the academic culture in the United States, and the establishment of a sense of commonality between tutor and writer. In addition to a shared heritage language allowing for easier communication, this common ground allows for a connection to develop between tutor and writer, which creates a sense of understanding during a tutoring session. This is something that is not only tremendously important but is a contributing factor to a tutor and writer having a

successful session and potentially one, that establishes an ongoing relationship between tutor and writer in the Writing Center; where in which for example, the same writer and same tutor, work with each other throughout the duration of the entire school semester. I had hypothesized that there would be some disadvantages such as accent differences that could impede comprehension; however, the ELL writer expressed that, “accents make people unique and are what makes one appreciate other cultures” (ELL Writer, 2017) and a tutor expressed that, “although it may be hard to understand someone with an accent at first, it is definitely manageable” (Tutor, 2017). The ELL writer expressed that, “working with a tutor with an accent made me feel not as self-conscious about my own accent,” (ELL Writer, 2017) which suggests that an ELL Writer working with a multilingual tutor who is a non-native English speaker could help them in terms of feeling that they are in a comfortable, nonjudgmental environment.

### **Recommendations**

One recommendation that emerged from my research is to establish an option on writing center forms where writers can potentially choose the language spoken during their session. The limitation that exists with this is the difficulty of accommodating to every writer's heritage language. However, when there is staff with this concordance, the information should be made transparent to the writer through writer profiles. The ELL writer (2017) expressed, “for the benefit of ELL students, it would be nice to have tutors with skills for languages besides English in order to accommodate to others,” as well as that they would like to have the option on writing center forms to choose the language spoken by them and their tutors. Other recommendations include recruiting more multilingual tutors who are non-native English speakers to work in the Writing Center, so that writers can have the option of working with a tutor who speaks the same heritage language as them or working with a tutor that is multilingual and a non-native English

speaker. Ultimately, one of my aims with this research study is to highlight the importance of making all tutors, not solely multilingual tutors approach ELL writers in an empathetic, understanding and non-stigmatizing manner.

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