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Hailey Hibbard
Utah State University

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Perché non mi aiuti?

(Why won't you help me?)

Hailey Hibbard

Utah State University

Abstract: Writing center tutors often have difficulties navigating tutoring sessions with English Language Learner students and are not able to meet their unique needs. This paper reports the emotional and academic needs of these students, and how writing center tutors can best address and meet those needs.

Key words: Writing centers, ELL students

I remember my first day at the *Scuola Media Lugano I* clearly. As I stepped into that large, villa-style building, the reality set in that I was attending my first day of middle school in a new country, being expected to fulfill homework assignments and take tests in Italian, a language that I had never heard before. I was equipped only with the knowledge of how to say hi and bye (*Ciao!*), How are you? (*Come stai?*), I am fine, and you? (*Sto bene, e tu?*) and goat (*capra*)-- looking back, I'm not sure why I knew that one.

I walked into the big classroom full of students my age. I was filled with excitement, anticipation, and anxiety. My dream of living in the Italian-speaking city of Lugano, Switzerland, had finally come true, and I was so excited to begin my new adventure. I was looking forward to learning a new language, making new friends, and diving into a new culture. My heart pounded so quickly that I thought it would fall out of my chest. My new homeroom teacher was talking to the class, probably introducing herself and establishing rules. I looked at her, not understanding a single word she was saying. I was scared. I thought to myself, *Can I do this? Will I ever make friends? Will I ever learn this language?* I watched my peers and how they interacted with each other. They laughed and talked and, being the social eleven-year-old I was, I wanted to join in. I wanted to make new friends. I wanted to learn Italian. I wanted to succeed. And that didn't happen right away. My first year in Switzerland was very difficult for me. I felt as if I were trapped. I could not communicate with most of my teachers and, for the first time in my life, I struggled in school and felt like an outsider. Completing schoolwork felt impossible, and I became more and more discouraged.

During this difficult time in my life, I was blessed with a teacher named Paola. I would meet with her a few times a week in order to learn Italian. At the beginning, I could not

understand a single thing she said but could feel of her goodness and sincere desire to help me. With her encouragement, patience, and faith in my abilities, I eventually became fluent in Italian. I overcame the linguistic barriers that once blocked my road to success because Paola addressed not only my academic needs, but my emotional needs as well. Because I felt that she sincerely wanted to help me, I trusted her, and that led to my success.

Ten years have passed. Currently, I am a writing center tutor at Utah State University. As I have tutored English Language Learners (ELLs), I have relied on my personal experience in order to be like Paola and strive to meet all of my students' needs. I have learned that we writing center tutors must find balance in addressing the emotional and academic needs of the ELL students that come in for a tutoring session. If we do so, the students will not only become more confident in their abilities, but also more independent and proficient writers.

Because ELL students are more vulnerable and need additional instruction, it is important to offer them the emotional support they need. This emotional support may take many forms and may be adjusted depending on individual students and their respective cultures. Tutors will be able to offer this support by understanding the importance of being positively polite and direct in tutoring sessions with students learning English (Cogie 62).

Positive politeness is key in making non-native English speakers feel comfortable and at ease in tutoring sessions. Tutors must learn the distinction between positive and negative politeness. Positive politeness makes students feel liked and listened to, while negative politeness makes students feel insignificant, petty, and insecure (Calhoun and Youmans 34). Tutors are positively polite as they notice and attend to the students' needs, exaggerate interest, seek

agreement, and show optimism. Negative politeness, on the other hand, includes being pessimistic, questioning, and indirect (35).

Indirectness is a main issue that ELLs have with writing centers. Writing centers overall teach tutors to be indirect; to ask “leading questions, allowing writers to say what they think rather than tutors thinking for them.” (Nan 56) At Utah State University, we tutors ask our students thought-provoking questions to help them think deeply about their topic and reach their “lightbulb moments”. We want to help them strengthen their content, organize their papers, and become independent writers. ELL students, on the other hand, tend to have already planned out their papers thoroughly and know what they would like to convey to their audience, but do not know how to express those ideas clearly.

As I have tutored ELL students, I have noted that thought-provoking, indirect questions are rather unnecessary and tend to cause more confusion than enlightenment. For example, one day I was tutoring a student from China. He was writing an essay for a graduate school application. As I read the essay, there were some sentences that did not make sense, and I struggled to understand the ideas he was trying to express. Instead of being direct and asking him, “What did you mean to say in this sentence?”, I asked him something along the lines of, “What idea were you trying to communicate in your paper? As a reader, what do you want me to understand by reading this essay?” By asking more indirect and complex questions, the student became confused and flustered. Unbeknownst to myself, I had been negatively polite. By being indirect, I made the student feel inferior, confused, and nervous. Had I been more positively polite and direct, he would have been able to express his ideas to me, and I would have been able to help him find a way to express them more clearly.

Directness is a key factor of positive politeness. Tutors must be direct with their ELL students in order to have a successful session that promotes emotional stability. This directness, which is usually discouraged in writing centers, is the missing link that leads to knowledge acquisition and an increase of self-confidence for students learning English. A tutor must strive to be honest, clear, and not afraid to ask, “Would it be helpful if I rephrase what I just said?” or “Would you like me to explain that differently?” By being direct with the students, they will feel the tutor’s sincere desire to help them. Tutors should encourage writers to be active participants in the consultation “by asking direct, specific questions that writers can answer” (Nan 58). In order to have the confidence and initiative to work towards their goal of a successful paper, non-native English writers need to understand what tutors are asking them and what is expected of them. Like wandering in darkness could cause any traveler to despair, when ELL students do not know what path to take to get to their end goal, they become discouraged and flustered. By giving more solid direction, tutors can give their tutees a sense of direction and confidence; two emotions needed to fuel the pursuit of success.

Tutors can emotionally assist ELL students best when they meet the students’ academic needs. One academic need that tutors tend to neglect is that of going over grammar and teaching grammatical principles to the students who need assistance in that regard. When I was a second language learner, writing in Italian was a challenge. I became so focused on finding the correct words that I would struggle with grammar and proper sentence structure. While my classmates needed help improving their tone and organization in their papers, I needed help with the simple things. Likewise, ELL students’ needs differ greatly from those of native English speakers. Writing center tutors tend to be afraid of tutoring non-native English speakers because the

session will predominantly focus on grammar and sentence structure, and many try to shy away from the students' desires in order to focus on higher level concerns such as paper content and organization. Non-native speakers, however, will not benefit from the traditional writing center procedures and need their tutor to play the role of an English grammar and sentence structure informant rather than a creative thinking facilitator (Young Kyung 24).

ELL students believe that learning to speak and write in English requires a mastery of English grammar, and when tutors deny that need, the students will not feel that they have truly learned English and will have great feelings of self-doubt (Moussu 55). That feeling of self-doubt will make the ELLs dread writing and see themselves as failures. No one wants to ever feel as if they have failed, and those blows to self-esteem may cause a student to quit. I felt that way when I was younger, and there were many times when I was ready to give up on ever being a proficient writer in Italian. Too many blows to my self-esteem caused me to doubt myself, and my goal of linguistic fluency seemed impossible. In order to avoid this common reality, it is essential for us to show students their grammatical errors throughout the paper so they will learn to recognize their mistakes and improve their English skills. We must be prepared to not only point out their grammatical errors, but also to make direct changes to their papers in order to demonstrate grammatical principles. As a result, the students "become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses as writers" (Young-Kyung 24). The more feedback the students receive, the more students will learn to self-edit their work and become independent writers.

Tutors, my message is simple. As someone who has attended school in a different language, I know from experience that language learners have different needs that you will need to address. Be aware of how you can support these students emotionally and academically before

you begin the session. Support them emotionally by being genuine, listening intently, and being positively polite. Don't hesitate to teach them grammatical principles and make direct changes to their paper if that is necessary. Most importantly, never put writing center protocol above the future success of your pupil. As you balance the emotional and academic needs of your English Language Learner students, you will have a productive session that will enable them to learn from their mistakes and simultaneously boost their confidence.

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