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## We Found Language in a Lonely Place: A Rumination Into Quieting the Fears of EL Students and Quieting Our Own Fears about Effectively Tutoring Them

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We Found Language in A Lonely Place:  
A Rumination Into Quieting The Fears of EL Students and Quieting Our Own Fears  
about Effectively Tutoring Them

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## Abstract

Keywords: EL, English learner, tutor, tutoring, second language, English, USU, writing, confidence, experience, grammar, content, writing process, ability, support, skills, independent, Writing Center, English Learning Center, collaboration, brainstorming, concerns.

This text shares the concern that many tutors face in effectively tutoring EL students by helping their confidence as writers, addressing their concerns, and helping them build long-term writing skills. The text will address what tutors can do in their tutoring sessions to help EL students with their writing concerns. There is discussion about some of the most common EL concerns such as grammar, or cohesion. These concerns are met with suggestions such as addressing grammar, talking about the ideas that the writer wants to convey, brainstorming ideas and getting them to write them down, and being mindful of how the students are feeling in their writing process. The essay goes later to discuss other resources to direct our EL students towards, such as Tea Time or writing classes at the English Learning Center (ELC) here in Logan, Utah.

I quietly observed from the corner of the room and curiously watched as a seasoned tutor coaxed along the tutoring session with an intelligent, yet insecure woman. The woman was a graduate student, obviously very experienced in her field, and came to the Science Writing Center to prepare an application for a PhD program. It was not a question of whether she was confident in her field of study, but more of how she perceived writing in a language that was not native to her. She stopped the tutor every few words as she read aloud to question the grammar or word choice. The tutor did a great job of moving the session along, but it was difficult for there to be any real progress when the student would stop to agonize over every sentence. As a language learner myself, I know the feeling of having complex ideas to convey, but the insecurity of grammar and speech gets in the way of articulating those ideas.

This observation experience, my own tutoring experiences, and my attempts as a student trying to learn a second language, have raised an important question in my mind that I think most tutors ask themselves as well: How can we successfully tutor English Learning (EL) students? What is working in our tutoring and what can we improve on? As with any tutoring session, we want to build their confidence in their writing, address their concerns, and help them build long term writing skills. The only way to know what to help them with is to communicate with them directly, which is what I did for this paper. Together using the suggestions discussed within this paper, we as tutors can explore ways of how we can improve our tutoring to meet the needs of EL students. EL students can feel alone in their pursuit to learn and write in a new

language, but as tutors we can help take some of the burden off of them by how we tutor.

Knowing what a successful tutoring session looks like is a good place to start in knowing how to best help EL students. As I've discussed this topic with other tutors I've found the common consensus to be that a successful tutoring session is one where the student is guiding the session, the student has their concerns met, and they leave with an idea of how to move forward. Overall, the student should have a positive and constructive experience and hopefully feel more confident in their abilities. This goes for all students we tutor at the Writing Center no matter their linguistic circumstances.

I spoke with some EL students at the tutoring center and some of my co-workers that are English learning students, and asked them what they feel would make a good tutoring session and what are some common concerns. Most of their concerns are what we see with most writers no matter the language. Some worries that EL students expressed are about their grammar and tone, articulating their ideas the way they want, not knowing where to start, and understanding what is expected of their paper.

Since grammar is one of the most common concerns of EL students, the process of correcting grammar can become a tool in teaching. EL students can learn new concepts and improve their long-term writing skills, if the tutor corrects grammar in a way that is meant to teach the concept behind the correction. As stated in *The Bedford Guide*, It's important to look at sentences and paragraphs as a whole to know what could be omitted before diving into making grammatical corrections. It also reminds the tutor to be sure not to overwhelm the writer by explaining and correcting too many

grammar issues, as it can lead to discouragement and insecurity (Leigh, Zimmerelli; pg 64).

As tutors, we do not want the writer's voice to become lost or drowned out by our own suggestions. Since EL students do depend on native English speakers as an authority figure in the tutoring session, some students tend to agree with anything that the tutor suggests. To be sure that what they are trying to convey is not lost in the process of reforming the content for clarity, a suggestion could be to ask open ended questions to get them to talk you through the idea they are trying to explain.

Don't be afraid to spend time working on developing these ideas since they will strengthen and add greatly to the content of the paper. A great place to start when asking questions is to have them explain to you the introduction and thesis, and then read through to make sure that what they said and what they wrote match up. Talking through ideas can at times be one of the most effective tools in helping EL students develop their confidence in their writing ability. Having the student speak about their ideas will help them write boldly and clearly. Dr. Korostyshevskiy, the author of "Spoken Language and Fear of the Blank Page" explains in his research that

"In some instances, orally expressing thoughts and ideas can be an effective method to connect and intertwine them in one coherent whole. It appears to be particularly effective when an individual struggles with generating ideas. The method of "free-talking" can be just as or, perhaps, even more productive than the techniques of freewriting, brainstorming, or mind mapping" (Korostyshevskiy, pg 13).

When trying to help a student start the writing process, that step can sometimes be the hardest. I think that all of us as writers experience the feeling of being overwhelmed, which in consequence can make us procrastinate starting. If students feel overwhelmed because they can't understand the assignment expectations, they will feel less motivated to start. If they do understand what is expected of them, they are less likely to have anxiety about the work they have ahead and will feel more motivated to start. Making sure to orally discuss and explain the assignment and rubric will help the student feel less overwhelmed and give them a place to start. The *Bedford Guide* suggests many useful moves and techniques that help a writer starts the process such as thought maps, lists, and free writing exercises (Leigh, Zimmerelli; pg 34).

Being patient with the process while working with EL students makes a world of difference about how they will remember their writing experience. Being empathetic and patient with the process and taking time to make sure the student understands what they need to write can go a long way.

There are many other resources for EL students such as Tea Time ("Teaching English Afternoons" at the USU Writing Center), or writing classes at the English Learning Center in Logan. These can be extra help outside of the writing center for them socialize, become familiar with some of the tutors, and practice their English. As we receive more opportunities to tutor EL students, we will broaden our knowledge, improve our tutoring skills, and develop new skills to enhance the confidence of our EL students and help them improve their long term writing skills.

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