

Writing Center Challenges: A Case Study

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Acquiring English academic writing skills is challenging for many learners. A self-access writing center was established at a private university in Tokyo and offers one-on-one sessions where learners can consult more proficient tutors, discuss their writing issues and gain advice. The Writing Center has helped many learners improve their writing skills such as coherence and cohesion as well as linguistic issues, functioning as a valuable place where students can learn how to improve their writing skills outside class. However, some operational issues have arisen. After outlining some logistical challenges, this paper introduces some measures that the Writing Center has taken in order to ensure that quality sessions are provided to learners.

学術的なライティング`スキル習得は多くの学習者にとって努力を要するものである。京の私立大学にある東京の私立大学にあるライティング`センターで`は、高い語学力を持つ学生`チューター`高い英語力をもつ学生`チューターに相談し、ライティング`の問題点を話しあい`アドバイスを得ることのできる1対1のセッションを提供している。このライティング`センターは言語的な課題にとど`まらず`、文の整合性等、学術文章スキルの向上において多くの学習者`の手助けをし、授業外において学習者`ライティング`スキルを磨く`価値的な場として機能してきた。しかしながら、センターの運営においてはいくつかの問題も生じ`ている。本稿で`は、運営面`の問題点の概要に触れ、当センター`セッションの質の確保のために実施してきた対策を紹介する。

Introduction

Acquiring the skills of English academic writing is a challenging task for many learners. In order to overcome some of their difficulties, university students can consult more experienced tutors in a dedicated writing center (Cassidy, Gillespie, Glasgow, Kobayashi and Roloff-Rothman, 2011). In recent years, writing centers have become places where writing issues are discussed and advice is provided, in contrast to traditional ones that focused on error correction (McKinley, 2010). This paper will discuss some of the common challenges experienced at a self-access writing center at a private university in Tokyo. In the Writing Center, there is a focus (heavy emphasis) on cohesion and coherence as part of academic writing conventions in general because these are both common areas which challenge university learners. The Writing Center was established to help

university EFL learners to write academically. However, there are several operational challenges that the Writing Center needs to overcome in order to provide quality sessions for learners. After briefly introducing the university's Writing Center, this paper will outline several operational challenges that the Writing Center is facing and what measures have been taken to address those logistical problems.

About the Writing Center

The Writing Center at our university was established in 1999 as a part of the university's self-access programs with the purpose of helping learners improve their academic writing skills. Japanese EFL learners of elementary to intermediate proficiency levels mainly visit the Writing Center. Learners often come to the sessions to improve their paragraphs or essays that are assigned as homework in their English classes. Many of the learners coming to the Writing Center have linguistic problems in their writing such as mistakes in certain aspects of grammar and the use of informal language in their academic writing. Although those linguistic challenges are dealt with in the Writing Center sessions, the Writing Center focuses more on the conventions of English academic writing. For example, the correct usage, in writing, of cohesion and coherence is challenging for many Japanese EFL learners. The Writing Center is an internally funded self-access program holding sessions from Monday to Friday, and each session runs for a duration of 30 minutes. The Writing Center tutors are paid undergraduate students, graduate students, and international students who work two to three shifts a week. In order to have a session, students make a reservation online. When students come to the Writing Center sessions, they bring their writing and get feedback on it. The language of instruction in the Writing Center sessions is either Japanese or English depending on the tutors. Thus the Writing Center functions as a place where learners can improve their academic writing skills outside class. However, in terms of the operation of the Writing Center, there are several challenges that need to be overcome if the Writing Center is to better help learners be more successful in their English academic writing.

The Writing Center's Operational Challenges

The first challenge is the recruitment of new Writing Center tutors. Currently, half of the tutors are Japanese students and the other half are international students. Ideally, it would be better if the Writing Center could hire Japanese tutors with high English proficiency and a background of formal academic writing instruction, or international students who have received formal instruction in academic writing and have a good command of Japanese. In reality, however, sometimes the Writing Center has no choice other than to employ all applicants when the number of positions available and the number of applicants are equal. In this situation, the Writing Center cannot choose based on the experience and education of the applicants.

The most compelling issue at the Writing Center is the inconsistent quality of the sessions conducted by different tutors. First, the sessions conducted by Japanese tutors and international tutors vary considerably. One of the primary problems is that learners often do not understand the feedback provided in English. Currently, half of the staff are international students, including native English speakers and those who speak English as their second or third language. Most international students are in the process of learning Japanese, and their Japanese proficiency is not necessarily high. Therefore, many conduct sessions in English or mix English and Japanese. However, even if they mix languages, it is often difficult to provide explanations and comments in a comprehensible way because tutors need to be familiar with certain vocabulary or expressions used in discussing writing and grammar. Some students have difficulty expressing where they need help because of their low English proficiency.

Another cause of inconsistency between Japanese tutors and international tutors stems from whether or not they have experience of writing in a second language themselves. For those who have no experience of second language writing, it is often difficult to understand the difficulties that students are facing. Indeed, the Writing Center coordinator also is of the opinion that those tutors who have received English writing instruction seem to be able to offer more effective feedback on learners' writing.

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A second area of inconsistency is that some tutors only focus on grammar and vocabulary issues whereas some focus on the organization and structure of learners' writing. In the university academic English writing courses, the focus of instruction is to help students understand the organization and structure of academic writing. Therefore, tutors are expected to help students with these higher level issues. However, despite the Writing Center mission to help learners to be autonomous, some tutors just check grammar and vocabulary during the sessions. This inconsistency between classroom instruction and Writing Center sessions affects the trust between instructors and students. Indeed, the Writing Center has received some complaints regarding this issue from both teachers and students. For example, there was a case where a student came back from a Writing Center session with their grammar mistakes fixed but not the organizational or structural issues which should have been the focus of the Writing Center session. Because many students bring their course assignments to the Writing Center, this issue can affect students' academic grades.

The third inconsistency is the difference in motivational level among tutors, a problem which the Writing Center coordinator himself recognizes. Some tutors are very keen, motivated, and serious about the sessions. However, some tutors seem to consider themselves as just 'part-timers.' Their level of dedication to the work is not as high as expected. This results in inconsistent quality of feedback. Such motivational and attitudinal differences can influence the quality of the sessions.

Another inconsistency among sessions is time management. In the Writing Center, each session is 30 minutes-long, and there are four sessions back to back each day. The last five minutes are usually used for signing the Writing Center log sheets that students bring, sending students off, recording session logs for Writing Center administration purposes, and calling the next student in. As a result, there is only 25 minutes to work on the student's writing. Within this 25 minutes, the tutors ask students what their assignments are and what they would like to improve upon, read the student's writing, make comments and suggestions, and have time for questions and answers. Completing these tasks within 25 minutes is very challenging, and tutors are required to work efficiently. Some tutors, especially novice tutors, sometimes go over time or cannot check students'

writing entirely. The Writing Center coordinator explains that if tutors only check a part of students' writing, many students feel dissatisfied and worry about their writing.

The last operational challenge that the Writing Center is facing is that some students reserve Writing Center sessions, but then they do not show up. This means that students who really want to attend the Writing Center sometimes lose a chance to have a Writing Center session. In the current system, students make a reservation online in advance. Since the Writing Center offers one-on-one sessions, if a student reserves a session online, other students cannot make a reservation. There are a number of students who come to the Writing Center as a part of their English course requirements. As proof of their visit to the Writing Center, students can get one stamp per session on their Writing Center attendance log. However, since students sometimes skip their sessions without canceling their reservation online, other students who need to have Writing Center sessions cannot make a reservation. Therefore, the Writing Center receives complaints regarding its session availability.

Addressing the Challenges

To solve the issues related to the inconsistency of session quality, the Writing Center holds training sessions several times throughout a semester. The purpose of the training sessions is to standardize tutoring sessions as much as possible so that there is consistency in terms of the quality of sessions. In the training sessions, tutors have opportunities to share difficulties they face during the tutoring sessions, suggest solutions, and discuss time management techniques. In addition, tutors have an opportunity to provide feedback on sample writing and compare what kind of feedback they have given on the sample written work. Then, with the Writing Center coordinator, tutors check what should be focused on in giving feedback. The training sessions can positively affect the issue of feedback inconsistency among tutors and moderately influence time-management issues. However, issues related to motivation and language proficiency are hard to directly address during the training sessions because those issues depend on personal factors rather than on their skills.

As a way to address the issue of students' no-shows that negatively affect other learners who really need to attend the Writing Center, it has been requested that the Writing Center should increase the number of sessions

so that the center can better accommodate learners. However, student no-shows affect what percentage of the Writing Center shifts are actually used. Since the Writing Center staff are paid part-time workers, increasing the number of sessions offered necessitates an increase in the budget for the Writing Center. Consequently, the Writing Center has faced a dilemma. The Writing Center wishes to offer more sessions, but if the session's utility rate is lowered due to student no-shows the Writing Center cannot increase the number of sessions. To solve this problem, the online reservation system has changed: if a student does not show up, the student will be locked out for 2 weeks and will be unable to use the center.

Conclusion

The Writing Center has been facing several operational challenges. The biggest challenge is the inconsistency in feedback quality arising from various factors such as tutors' linguistic and writing-related educational background, and time-management. Training sessions have been held as a means of assuring greater consistency in feedback quality. Other minor issues such as the varying experience and education of Writing Center tutors and students' no-shows have been pointed out. Nevertheless, the benefits for students far outweigh these operational challenges because the Writing Center offers students vital opportunities for them to improve their academic writing skills outside class. Therefore, although the Writing Center is currently facing these challenges, it will continue developing its sessions in order to better support learners in their English academic writing.

References

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