TEACHING ENHANCEMENT GRANT
AY2011/2012

FINAL REPORT

Improving Writing Consultation Sessions for Better Writing Revision
and Higher Writing Quality

Dr Deng Xudong
Senior Lecturer
Centre for English Language Communication
National University of Singapore
Final Report for TEG Research Project

Summary

Purpose: The Writing and Communication Hub has been in operation for four semesters now. It is time that a proper evaluation was done to assess how effective its key pedagogy, one-to-one peer consultation, is in helping students revise their writing. The purpose of this project is to examine the kind of changes students made on the basis of their tutors’ comments on their drafts and then to make recommendations on tutors’ behavior so that it facilitates more global and quality changes to students’ drafts.

Methods: Six writing tutor participants from among the current pool of writing tutors for the Writing and Communication Hub and ten student writer participants who have writing assignments and would use the Hub services were recruited. All consultation sessions between the tutor participants and the student writer participants were video-audio tape recorded, transcribed, and coded. In addition, the drafts that the student writers brought to the consultation session were copied immediately after the session and collected for subsequent analysis. The student writers were also asked to submit a copy of the revised draft that they completed after the session. Both sets of drafts were analyzed and coded for levels of revisions made. Specifically, four different layers of analysis were used to best capture the revisions: type of problem attempted, type of changes made, strategies for making the change, and outcome of the change.

Results: 1) Tutors mostly adopt a bottom-up approach to consultation, examining each sentence closely before moving to the next sentence. 2) Around half of the problems identified and the changes made are word-level problems and changes. 3) Substitution is the most popular strategy used for making the change, constituting almost half of all the strategies made. This is followed by the use of addition, then deletion, and finally by reorganization. 4) A great majority of the changes made are successful, indicating that our tutors are competent in giving advice to fellow students on their writing. 5) For those unsuccessful changes, many are attributed to student writers’ failure in making corresponding changes after making a spotted change.

Conclusions and recommendations: 1) Students can be instructed on how to use alternative approaches to consultation, such as a top-down approach, in which more focus on major structural elements such as thesis statement, topic sentences and other important genre-specific information elements is placed. 2) Once a top-down approach is used, changes to major structures, content, and ideas may be effected. 3) Tutors need to be aware of the tension of being over-explicit and allowing freedom and ownership so as to know when to suggest very detailed changes and when not to (Thonus, 2004; Williams, 2004).
1. BACKGROUND

On March 14, 2011, the Centre for English Language Communication opened its first Writing and Communication Hub station located in the Central Library to help NUS students with their writing and communication needs. The Hub provides free one-to-one consultation service to all NUS students who need help with their writing and oral presentation assignments. During the six weeks of trial period, a total of 76 students sought the consultation services of the Hub. In subsequent semesters, there has been a steady increase in the number of student visits, as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Number of student visits in the past four semesters](image)

While almost all the students who used the Hub service expressed great satisfaction with and gratitude to the help they were provided with by their peer consultants, it is not certain whether and to what an extent such peer consultation sessions have any impact on how student writers revise their subsequent drafts. Therefore, this proposed study aims to examine the effects, if any, of peer consultation sessions on revision by student writers and study how to improve such sessions for better writing revision and higher writing quality.

Writing and Communication Hub is more commonly known in the world as Writing Centre. The concept of writing centre is not new as it can be dated back to the 1960s when there was a surge of enrolments in colleges and universities in the U.S. and an increasing emphasis on
students’ writing abilities. The realization of the importance of writing in education is probably based on the premise that language and learning are intimately connected (Martin, 1992) and that writing helps promote thinking and intellectual development, sustain the knowledge learnt from a subject area, and achieve a sense of ownership for the education received (Barnett & Rosen, 1999). In post-secondary institutions in many parts of the world, the instruction of writing skills has been largely handled by writing programs of various sorts. In the context of higher education in North America (and more recently in Europe), the pedagogical movement that has been in existence since the 1970s and is still gaining currency is called Writing Across the Curriculum, the main aim of which is to promote general as well as discipline-specific learning through writing (Barnett & Blumner, 1999; Wallace & Wallace, 2006).

In support of such a movement is the emergence of writing centres (or writing labs, writing clinics, writing rooms, writing places), which typically embrace the pedagogy of individualized instruction in the form of peer tutoring (Williams & Severino, 2004). After more than three decades of development, writing centres have become the norm in higher education in North America and increasingly so in Europe (Gardner & Rousculp, 2006; International Writing Centers Association; European Writing Centers Association). Despite the prevalence of writing centres in post-secondary institutions in different parts of the world, very little research has been done to explore how successful peer consultation, the predominant writing centre pedagogy, is in helping student writers become better writers (Bell, 2000). Most writing centre evaluations have thus been restricted to the use of the number of student visits and surveys of students’ degree of satisfaction with the service provided. Most lacking is the examination of actual revisions made by student writers after their writing centre consultation sessions, with the exception of Williams’ study (2004) on second language writers in a writing center in a U.S. university setting. We believe that such an examination is important as it can help us train our writing consultants to conduct consultations which will bring about more positive effects on writing revision and writing quality.

METHOD

Data

The data consists of 10 consultation sessions involving 10 student writers and 6 tutors. The duration of the consultations sessions varies, depending on the nature of the writing task and the status of activity in the Hub. The type of assignments also varies, ranging from essay to project to report to thesis introduction, with the predominant type being different kinds of essays (e.g. reflection essay, reading response essay).
The data set consists of pre- and post-consultation drafts and the word-for-word transcript of the entire consultation sessions. The transcripts are used to check whether the changes are a result of the consultation.

**Analytic Framework**

The analytic framework is a data-driven framework, derived by examining and re-examining the changes that were made to one writing assignment by the student writer. The pre- and post-consultation drafts were first re-formatted by adding a sentence number to each sentence, isolating each sentence into a separate block, and placing corresponding sentences in the two versions to be in parallel to each other. In this way, changes that were made to the original draft can be easily noticed. Once a change is identified, four different layers of analysis were used to best capture the changes: type of problem attempted, type of changes of made, strategies for making the change, and outcome of the change.

Each layer of analysis is further divided into smaller categories. In the type of problem attempted, four different levels of problem are identified: word level, phrase or clause level, sentence level, beyond sentence level and mechanics. The same five levels are used to describe the changes that have subsequently made to the problem identified. In the strategies for making the changes, four different strategies have been employed: substitution, addition, deletion, and reorganization. For the last layer of analysis, the outcome of change is either successful or unsuccessful change, with the grammaticality of the resultant sentence as the predominant criterion.

After the formulation of the analytic framework, this framework was used to analyze a second writing assignment by all three of us to fine-tune the framework and also to ensure its consistency and easy applicability. Then using the finalized framework, two other CELC colleagues analyzed one assignment separately, to establish the reliability of our analysis. After the reliability is established, each of us is responsible for analyzing two more assignments.

*Type of problem attempted and type of change made*

The term ‘problem’ is used instead of the term ‘error’ as the ‘problem’ may not be an error per se, but is what the tutor or the tutee has perceived as somewhat problematic and in need of change because of stylistic effects, formality or word usage problems.

1. Word-level problem and change

Very often, a word-level change is made to solve a word-level problem being identified.

| Ex 1: WD: S2 | They both think even religion is a perpetual topic, but with regard to the time and space, there is no almighty method to include all | They both think although religion is a perpetual topic, but with regard to the time and space, there is no universal method to |
the realities. include all the realities.

But the level of change may not necessarily be corresponding to the level of problem attempted. For example, a phrase level change can be made to solve a word-level problem (see Ex 2), and vice versa.

Ex 2: WD: S14a

| It is not a new thing that people turn to cult for help, ... | It is not a new thing that people turn to religious cults for help, ... |

2. Phrase- or clause-level problem and change

Ex 3: WGJ: S3: Clause-level problem and change

| Although the climate of Singapore is the tropical rain forest climate, the large urban population requires far more water than the precipitation provides. | Although Singapore has a tropical rain forest climate, the large urban population requires far more water than the precipitation provides. |

Ex 4: WGJ: S12: phrase-level problem and change

| Moreover, the water charge can depend on the amount of water usage. | Moreover, the cost of water can depend on the amount of water usage. |

3. Sentence-level problem and change

Ex 5: WD: S12:

| Nowadays, Buddhist monks and nuns in China are more like a job instead of the moral leader to enlighten the suffering people. | Nowadays, Buddhist monks and nuns in China are more consider their religious leadership as a job rather than as a medium through which to enlighten the suffering people. |

4. Beyond-sentence-level problem and change

Ex 6: WD: S15-16

| The reason for that could be attributed to this: with the globalization going on, economy efficiency is not just the goal of a nation, but for ordinary people as well. A lot of people turn to cult for help is kind of looking for a “short-cut” to achieve what they are dreaming about, because the dominant Theravada Buddha is just too far | The reason for that is nowadays with globalization going on, a lot of people expect immediate fulfillment of their demanding. Therefore, with the “immediate fulfillment” this “economic efficiency” oriented approach, more and more people turns to the religious cults. |
away and just get “pay back” in the after-life, and in this fast development society, ordinary people are craving for some instant favor from religions in return for praying and sacrifice.

5. Mechanic problem and change

Mechanic problems refer to those problems involving punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, as in Ex 7, where the comma is changed into a full stop and the resultant capitalization of ‘from’.

Ex 7: WD: S17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the reading, Kitiarsa gave a great description about “the genealogy of urban-based spirit-medium cults in modern Thailand”, from the detailed description, one can see how the “man of prowess” reflected from the gender and “ranking” of the deities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strategies for making the changes

Four different strategies have been identified: substitution, addition, deletion, and reorganization.

Substitution is simply using a different word, phrase, clause or sentence to replace the original word, phrase, clause, or sentence, as in ex 1-5.

Addition is to insert a word, phrase, clause, or sentence to the original version. The following example (Ex 7) is an example of adding one extra sentence to the pre-consultation draft.

Ex 8: WGJ: S13-15

| 13. The more one uses, the more one has to pay. |
| 14. None. |
| 15. Although the method is efficient, it might receive some objections from the industry sector, which consumes a great quantity of water annually. |
| 13. With increasing amount of water usage, the prize of water will be higher. |
| 14. Once the law is established, everyone should observe it. |
| 15. Although the method is efficient, it might receive some objections from the industrial sector which consumes a great quantity of water annually. |

Deletion, on the other hand, is to delete a word, phrase, clause, or sentence to the original draft. Ex 9 is an example of a word deletion.
In the reading, Kitiarsa gave a detailed description about “the genealogy of urban-based spirit-medium cults in modern Thailand”, from the detailed description, one can see how the “man of prowess” reflected from the gender and “ranking” of the deities.

Reorganization is used when the sentences in the pre-consultation draft are completely changed, either condensed or expanded. It is used almost exclusively for beyond-sentential level changes. Ex 10 shows that the original two sentences are combined and condensed into one sentence.

Ex 10: WGJ: S27-28

27. Only if advanced technology is utilized by appropriate people, can it have the maximum effect on saving water.
28. Actually, the spendthrift might be encouraged to waste even more water with the advanced technology.

27/28. Even with advanced technology, the spendthrift might still consume a large amount of water.

Outcome of change

A change is considered either successful or unsuccessful, depending on our professional judgment as to whether the resultant sentence is grammatical or not. Examples of successful changes are Ex 2, 3, and 4, where as examples of unsuccessful changes are Ex 1, 5 and 6.

FINDINGS

Type of Problem Attempted

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<th>Phrase/Clause</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Beyond-sentence</th>
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Type of Changes Made

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<td>16.9%</td>
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Strategies for Making the Change

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Outcome of Change Made

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<td>93.6%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

1. Tutors mostly adopt a bottom-up approach to consultation, examining each sentence closely before moving to the next sentence. Students can be instructed on how to use alternative approaches to consultation, such as a top-down approach, in which more focus on major structural elements such as thesis statement, topic sentences and other important genre-specific information elements is placed.

2. Around half of the problems identified and the changes made are word-level problems and changes. Once a top-down approach is used, changes to major structures, content, and ideas may be effected.

3. Substitution is the most popular strategy used for making the change, constituting almost half of all the strategies made. This is followed by the use of addition, then deletion, and finally by reorganization.

4. A great majority of the changes made are successful, indicating that our tutors are competent in giving advice to fellow students on their writing.

5. For those unsuccessful changes, many are attributed to student writers’ failure in making corresponding changes after making a spotted change (the tension of being over-explicit and allowing freedom and ownership) (Thonus, 2004; Williams, 2004).

REFERENCES


European Writing Centers Association, http://www.ewca.sabanciuniv.edu/eng/.


PRESENTATION FROM THE PROJECT

# Statement Of Accounts for Research and Ancillary Projects

**RUN BY:** ELCHYL  
**CLIENT:** 088 merlin  
**YRS_OFX_3CA_OVERALL**  
**Address:** Head of Centre for English Language Communication  
**National University of Singapore**  
**RESP. COST CTR:** C-373-000-020-001  
**PROJECT COMMENCEMENT DATE:** 01.08.2011  
**PROJECT COMPLETION DATE:** 31.08.2012

### Table: Overall Budget and Expenditure

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**TOTAL:** 1,044.00-  
**TOTAL:** 624.00-  

**Note:** We will assume that the statement is in order, if we do not hear from you within 2 weeks from the date of statement. If you need any clarifications, please call or write to RMS (65124593).