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Tongue versus Terrain

Considering the Positive Effects of Nonnative Speakers as Writing Consultants for L2 Students

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Abstract

This paper challenges the view that the tongue of the writing consultant is the *decisive and critical success factor in a L2 counselling situation, and in particular, for English Academic Purposes (EAP). As one of the core principles in writing pedagogy advises writing consultants to shift from language instruction to the structure and the rhetoric of a language, this is especially relevant for L2 writing. And it is particularly hard for consultants to stick to this mission as lay writers of English ask for a more directive approach and «just want their grammar mistakes corrected». To concentrate on textual features rather than single mistakes (the so-called high-order concerns before low-order concerns), is therefore especially challenging for L2 writing consultants. The non-native background of a writing consultant could be helpful to put emphasis on structure rather than language. However, in this paper I argue that what counts most is strong expertise in L2 writing and proficiency to train the rhetoric of English Academic writing.*

Academic writing in English is increasingly becoming part of the everyday curricula of many students. This has its roots in globalization, fast-growing student mobility and the dominance of English as the «lingua franca» for publishing and lecturing in many sciences. Graduate students, in particular, use English to engage in the «conversations» of their disciplines with scholars throughout the world. To be part of a scientific community means to read, write and publish in English. However, regular graduate study programs in Germany provide almost no specific preparation for the task of L2 writing and lag behind the growing importance and reality of English as the «lingua franca of Higher Education». Recently established Excellence clusters at German top universities try to correct these flaws in the higher educational system through colloquiums and other initiatives. For the majority of German universities, however, the problem often begins when students enter university – they are expected to already know how to write academic texts in *any language* before they actually start their university careers.[1]

In Germany, the situation for writing pedagogy is particularly paradoxical. While writing centres are slowly but surely being established throughout the country, the special needs of L2 writers have not been sufficiently addressed by their institutions. While EMI (English Medium Instruction) is most certainly not only a phenomenon of Higher Education in Germany, it is spreading exponentially here. While other countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and Norway

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have been teaching in English since as early as the 1950s, Germany has been catching up quickly since the 1990s (Coleman 2006: 6). Germany is now the third largest global recruiter of international students after the US and the UK and thought to pose a «current and future competitive threat» to the UK, as tuition fees are much lower than at British universities (Sheperd 2009).

That this is not merely sensationalism and scare-mongering of British media and can be seen in recent figures. Due to an advertising campaign, the number of international students in Germany has increased astonishingly by 63 % within six years (Coleman 2006: 8). More study programs are entirely or partly offered in English and written assignments are required to be submitted in English. For the past sixteen years, the DAAD (Deutsche Akademische Auslandsdienst) has supported German universities to implement 21 English-based study programs. From 2007 to 2012 alone, the number of study programs in English has doubled in Germany.[2]

In this article, we will first examine current L2 counselling practices at German writing centres, before turning to the advantages of English non-natives as L2 writing consultants[3], who are nonetheless proficient English speakers. First, I will outline the positive effects in terms of meeting the goals of the counselling situation. Secondly, I will discuss that flat hierarchies between consultants and students are beneficial for the counselling situation which can be easily achieved between non-natives and foreign students. Moreover, an awareness for the cultural background of the foreign student should be kept present but not predominant by the consultant. Finally, I will argue that non-native L2 consultants are in a better position to stress the importance of textual structures. As they have more distance to the language, they could stick to the objective for writing centres: «to help people help themselves».

Among the 29 writing centres and initiatives in Germany, many of those focus on L1 writing skills and their development.[4] The majority of writing centres use regular staff to give feedback on L2 writing during their office hours (University of Hannover, Europa – Viadrina University at Frankfurt/Oder etc.), while some universities offer native speakers as special writing consultants or visiting English-speaking students (PH Ludwigsburg, University of Tübingen). Some include single workshops on L2 writing in singular fields such as Humanities and Social Sciences (Universität of Konstanz), or provide links to Anglo-American institutions on the subject (Universität of Bielefeld). Others hold exchange programs with partner universities in English speaking countries (Universität of Göttingen with London Metropolitan University) or offer a range of L2 writing activities (Universität of Hildesheim). A common institutional strategy how to deal with L2 writing tasks for English Academic Purposes (EAP) is hardly implemented which is – as I will argue – linked to the lack of academic discussion about effective teaching and instructional strategies in L2 writing.[5] However, this is by no means a German phenomenon as Zhang (2008) reveals in his article. He is astonished by the limited number of studies in the field of L2 writing who deal with its pedagogical implications:

[1] This has also been observed by many scholars from Europe and elsewhere. For example, Melinda Reichelt, ESL Writing Coordinator and Professor at the University of Toledo/USA, writes: «Since like most European universities, German universities do not offer native language composition courses to first-year (or advanced) students; students are expected to enter the university already having the proficiency in German language writing to undertake university study» (Reichelt 2003, 100).

[2] These figures derive from the DAAD (Deutsche Akademische Auslandsdienst). Miriam Hoffelder mentioned these in her article «International aufgestellt» by the «Süddeutsche Zeitung»; http://www.sueddeutsche.de/bildung/studium-auf-englisch-international-aufgestellt-1.1394689.

[3] While we address here the person giving L2 counseling most frequently as a writing consultant, I will use other terms for reasons of variation, such as «tutor», «counselor», «instructor» or «L2 professional». I am aware that all of these terms might involve a different meaning, such as «tutors» being mostly associated with fellow students. They might also imply different pedagogical tasks, e.g. a more directive approach chosen as an instructor in comparison to a tutor or even a writing fellow. However, this article does not want to raise the question whether a fellow student or hired staff is the more suitable writing consultant, but argues whether the mother tongue of the writing consultant needs to be the L2. In any case, the consultant requires a proficient level of expertise in the relevant language and a training to understand writing processes.

[4] A list of writing centers in Germany can be found here: http://www.uni-paderborn.de/institute-einrichtungen/kompetenzzentrum-schreiben/schreibzentren-und-schreibdidaktik/.

[5] This is about to change right now as a recent symposium at the Leuphana University in Lüneburg addresses this topic (27–28 March 2014): «Supporting English Writing Competencies: The Role of Writing Centers for Second Language Writing». However, current articles still plead for more diversified writing centers in the US and elsewhere who adjust their methods in order to react to changing student populations and different demands (Chang 2013).

> But quite interestingly, in the history of L2 writing research, L2 writing instruction is an area which has been traditionally underrepresented, since *only a few studies* direct their major attention *to discussing instructional matters.* (Zhang 2008, 107; my emphasis).

The issue of writing instruction in L2 including the instructor's role in the writing process have been rather neglected areas in this young discipline: L2 writing research. Starting research on writing centres in Germany in the first instance, as rightly claimed by the German writing consultants Karin Girgensohn and Nora Peters, would also help to investigate today's existing L2 counselling practices (Girgensohn/Peters 2012).

Whereas two different theory models of the L2 writing, the product- versus process-approach, have been heavily disputed in the scientific community, the accompanying practical applications have not attracted the same attention by scholars:

> There has not been much research on their *applications* into classroom practices, such as *curriculum design, development of L2 writing, instruction materials*, and *L2 writing classroom activities*. Therefore, future research should continue to investigate the relevant issues in the *pedagogical practices* of teaching L2 writing. (Zhang 2008, 114; my emphasis)

For German graduate students and scholars, the most common writing task in a foreign language is to publish in English – in journals, for papers or poster presentations at international conferences. The reason why many prefer to publish in English is that scholars want their writings to be cited more widely, which is more likely to happen when the articles appear in English journals than their German equivalents. For example, English articles have been cited four times more than German ones[6] and «teachers cite increasingly in English in today's classrooms, not only in sciences but across the disciplinary panoply» (Coleman 2006: 6). Thus, academic writing tasks in English will prevail for most German scholars to advance their careers. Young academics, in particular, need to know how to publish in English to join the international academic world.

This leads to the following major questions: What would enhance the L2 writing skills of advanced learners/writers in the L2? What do we already know in L2 writing research that contributes to good L2 writing results? What is the instructor's role in the L2 writing process? And importantly, is it suitable to have native speakers as writing consultants in advanced L2 writing counselling situations such as with graduate students or foreign scholars seeking for advice?

This article seeks to re-consider the «common ground» that native speakers *necessarily* contribute to a good counselling situation in L2 writing. This view shall be challenged by opening up the discussion whether non-native speakers could be just as appropriate – taking existing research results on teacher response, feedback, and L2 needs into account. It will be argued here that a tutor with advanced linguistic competence might be even more helpful for the L2 writer's progress than a native speaker. Thus, I raise the question whether a L2 writing background of the consultant could be of even greater service to advanced L2 students than his/her native language proficiency. In other words: Is it the consultant's tongue or terrain of expertise that improves the L2 writers' development?

Eyes on the text – hands off the grammar

While the native speakers' biggest advantage is their linguistic intuition, the consultation situation for L2 learners differs greatly from a foreign language learning setting and should be. Writing consultation – especially in the L2 – is not, and should not merely be an exercise in grammar correction, which is particularly hard to achieve as L2 students prefer a directive approach where their grammar mistakes are just corrected by the instructor (Chang 2013, 3). However, a trained L2 writing consultant helps to keep attention on the structure of the written text, which leads ultimately to a general improvement as a writer in the target language.

As the «founding father» of writing pedagogy, Steven North, states in his early credo for writing centres: «Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing» (North 1984, 438). In line with this view, writing counselling should focus on the development of the writer rather than single texts. While the instinct (and hidden wish) of many L2 students for a quick grammar revision prevails, research has shown that indirect error techniques are more beneficial to students' long-term writing development than direct error feedback – especially to advanced learners (Ferris 2003, 52).

[6] This has been found out by researchers from the Alexander-von-Humboldt-Stiftung (cf. Hornbostel, Klingsporn, von Ins 2009).

While native speakers can be easily called on their mother tongue's competence, and are thus tempted to give direct feedback («XYZ is the correct verb form»), students learn more from indirect feedback responses («look at your verb endings to match it with subjects of your clauses»*).* They are pointed to the pattern of their errors, which requires them to reflect on their writing habits.

Elaborate feedback given by the tutor increases the students' own engagement with the text where they actively participate in the negotiation of meaning. When single errors are highlighted, students correct them, lean back and move on to the next error. In a meta-analysis of existing L2 research, most studies point at the fact that commenting is more effective for L2 writers than error location (Biber/Nekrasova/Horn 2011, i). When instructors give specific, content-based feedback on the meaning–level, L2 students mostly revise their drafts (Hyland 1990). The longer and more text-specific comments are given by L2 consultants, the most positive effect it had on the L2 student writing (Ferris 1997; Kepner 1991). Especially detailed cues helped the L2 students to improve their abilities to detect and self-correct their errors (Makino 1993). All in all, L2 writing research shows that content-based commenting and indirect error responses result in larger gains for the L2 writer's development. And what can non-native consultants do about this? They could be less tempted to give direct error feedback and to engage more in meaning-making activities with the L2 writers as non-natives perceive themselves rather equal to the L2 writers. A flat hierarchy between non-native tutors and L2 students contributes to focus on the overall structure of a text rather than single grammar mistakes as the tutor can no longer considered to be the language expert.

Flat hierarchies to negotiate meaning and foster understanding

This break of a rigid hierarchy between consultant and L2-writer also helps to confirm the student in his/her role as the author of the text. L2 writers tend to see their tutors as the «authority of the text» whereas *they* forget that *they* wrote the content and its intentions. Thus, the reversal of roles is less likely to happen during the counselling session when the tutor is on the same or on a similar linguistic level. The focus remains on the text message and a mutual understanding of how this could be most effectively conveyed to the target audience.

What has been said for the student, applies to the writing consultant, as well. The non-native writing tutor is also less inclined to impose his/her views on the text as s/he always strives for the «right» understanding of the L2 writing. A non-native speaker will more likely fulfil the claim to «avoid appropriation»*,* which was postulated by Rhetoric Professor Carol Severino at the University of Iowa (2009). The author's «voice» of a text is rather preserved if the tutor prevents giving too much advice from a higher standpoint than the student but rather let the student speak about his/her topic first. The stance for a collaborative pedagogy with mutual respect between student and instructor, which has been demanded by L2 writing pedagogues Matsuda and Cox (2009, 49), can be more likely reinforced when none of the parties is highly superior on the linguistic level.

In writing pedagogy, the emphasis in counselling is on high-order concerns in contrast to low-order concerns, meaning that the overall rhetorical structure of a text should be first dealt with in comparison to single linguistic mistakes such as grammar or word choice. Many articles in L2 writing argue that the writing tutor should always shift from the students' initial interest to correct mistakes on the grammar, lexical, syntactic level (so-called low-order concerns) to get the L2 students involved in the textual structure, the rhetoric of their texts, the hypothesis, the purpose, content, message, the intended audience of their texts (so-called high-order concerns; cf. Keh 1990). L2 writing experts even plead for re-negotiating what the goal of counselling should be at the beginning of each session between the tutor and the L2 student in order to have the L2 writer acknowledge «the need to become a proficient self-editor» (Linville 2009, 85). This understanding could also be more easily reached when the tutor is a non-native speaker as s/he could easily argue or even show that it is not in vain to work on your writing skills in a foreign language.[7]

Non-native proficient consultant as a motivator

The non-native writing consultant him/herself could serve as a positive role model that it is worth (and possible!) to achieve a high proficiency of writing in a foreign language whereas a native speaker could easily intimidate or overwhelm the L2 writer. The L2 learner

is more likely to think: «I will never achieve this level of proficiency, so why bother?» The motivational aspect plays a key role in a writer's development. It would also prevent some writing cultures from having wrong expectations about the workings of a writing centre. It will no longer be looked at as a mere editing service.
«Breaking the ice» seems to be particularly necessary when L2 writers are looking for advice in writing centres, as writing expert Shanti Bruce describes in her article of a similar title (2009). The anxiety most L2 writers feel when entering a writing centre could be reduced by facing a non-native writing consultant as the student gets the message: «We are all in same boat». This could lower the L2 students' anxiety, which allows them to feel more confident in acquiring new features in the target language because «low anxiety is conducive to acquisition». Affection plays a key role in L2 acquisition, in general, for which one of the most influential applied linguists, Stephen Krashen, coined the term «Affective Filter» (cited in Tseng 2009, 22).

Awareness of the L2 writing difficulties beyond cultural borders

The cultural gap between writing consultant and L2 student has been mentioned as another great concern by writing pedagogues such as Paul Kei Matsuda and Michelle Cox (2009). A native speaker of English could then comfortably fall into the role of a «tourist» inquiring too much about the culture of the L2 writer instead of the text at hand (Matsuda, Cox 2009, 46).
Naturally, a non-native speaker handles the counselling session with great sensitivity about cultural differences in writing traditions as the consultant him/herself *learned* the target language *consciously* instead of growing up with it (see also Krashen's Acquisition versus Learning Hypothesis). The non-native consultant is aware or at least alert to possible differences without taking certain writing traditions, genres and conventions of the target language for granted. ESL writing expert Ilona Leki, Professor at the University of Tennessee, admits: «But it is sometimes difficult for monolingual English speakers to fully grasp the *enormous amount of language a speaker or writer must command to be able to carry out these advanced literacy activities*, and it is easy to overreact to grammatical or lexical errors or to an unfamiliar accent» (Leki 2009, 2; my emphasis).
So far, this seems to be a summary of what is counter-productive to counselling L2 students. Although the most appropriate and effective type of (teacher) feed-back remains a key research question (Zhang 2008, 104), I would like to explore what seems to be helpful response and interaction dealing with advanced L2 writers.

Learning from a good point of departure

Even in the Interactionist's view on L2 acquisition which puts emphasis on interaction with «experts», the agents of this view admit that «such interaction is helpful when it is appropriate to the learner's current and potential level of development» (Tseng 2009, 25). The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky calls this the «Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)». Transferring this phenomenon to L2 writers, this means that an ideal consultant for L2 students should have a similar or a slightly higher language competence than the L2 student to be able to engage in an interaction which is adequate to the L2 students' current or potential next level of L2 competence.
An appropriate technique is «scaffolding» (Wood 1976; Bräuer 2009, 153), which means that the consultant offers only the kind of assistance that is beyond the L2 student's current performance ability. The consultant does not give the solution to a writing problem the person might have but rather supports in a way that the learner is then able to figure it out by himself. Applying this method of scaffolding to L2 counselling situations is easier for non-native speakers who will not overwhelm the student with too much information or address too many skills, as they remain themselves in a learning progress of the target language.

Addressing the particular needs of L2 writers

It seems as if native speakers forget or overlook the specific needs of L2 writers more easily as they do not

[7] I would like to thank Dr. Gerd Bräuer for providing multiple L2 writing assignments in the online learning environment of «Baustein 3: Besonderheiten der fremd- und zweisprachigen Textproduktion» at the University of Education in Freiburg (Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg). For the same reason, I would like to thank Professors Susan Delagrange, Cynthia Selfe, Kay Halasek, Ben McCorkle, Scott Lloyd DeWitt from the Ohio State University for providing discussion forums and thus, additional feedback through peers on earlier drafts. I am also deeply indebted to Andrew J. White (University of Mannheim) who «could not help but correct grammar and syntax in typical L1 fashion.»

face the same problems themselves during the writing process – while ignoring to address these issues in the worst case. This has been one of the results of a recent study (Matsuda et al. 2013). Through questioning ESL instructors, the research team discovered that writing teachers do not make any specific provisions regarding the particular issues L2 writers struggle with during their writing process although they perceive these.

In everyday teaching practice, native instructors revealed that they do *not* address their particular needs. Non-native speakers might be notably sensitive to these as they are naturally «trained» to look at *patterns* in the L2 because of their own learning-in-progress. As they acquired the target language through learning practice, their response to grammar mistakes (so-called low-order concerns) might be different. Even if they point at grammar mistakes, they will most likely look for the underlying structures instead of only detecting and correcting. To respond to error patterns is thought to be the best way for advanced L2 learners to improve their writing as this helps strengthen their self-correction abilities.

Enhancing the L2 writer's own evaluation skills

Having said all this, the biggest fear of all L2 students still remains: the non-native writing consultant might overlook some errors in the L2 learner's writing as s/he is him/herself not aware of these. Ironically enough, also L2 professionals are not immune from doing so. The most common fear among native (!) ESL instructors is to confuse or mislead students «by providing 'incorrect corrections' because of their own discomfort with grammar rules and terminology» (Ferris 2007, 176).

But even if the writing consultant fails to detect all errors in the student's writing, the question remains: Does he or she really need to? It is equally important to be aware that the «worst» errors in L2 writing felt by readers and teachers alike are global errors which impede reader comprehension (Harris, Silva 1993). Single grammar mistakes such as missing inflections or the use of wrong verb tenses «only become an issue when they become distracting» as one anonymous reviewer of this article stated. Even if L2 writers want their papers to «sound» native-like, L2 writing progress is less likely achieved by imitation but rather by improving their own assessment skills.

Non-native consultants cannot become too overzealous in correcting as Severino (2009) described her own foreign essay writing experience when she was eagerly corrected by her Italian teacher. They are presumably less tempted to give comprehensive and direct feedback than their native counterparts where advanced writers of English such as graduate students would not benefit from as much as through indirect and selective feedback. This helps advanced L2-writers to train and develop their own judgmental skills such as evaluating the rhetoric structures of their texts and understanding how their writing «sounds» to native ears. One of the consultant's major goals in L2 writing pedagogy should be preserving the L2 writers' voices while enabling to hone them. Borrowing terminology from ethnography, the goal of a L2 writing consultation should be reconsidered as «going native» rather than «becoming native».

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