

Review of Research on Conferencing  
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Articles Reviewed:

- Cumming, Alister and So, Sufumi. (1996). Tutoring second language text revision: does the approach to instruction or the language of communication make a difference. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. 5(3). 197-226.
- Ferris, Dana R. (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*. 29(1). 33-52.
- Goldstein, Lynn M. and Conrad, Susan M.. (1990). "Student input and negotiation of meaning in ESL writing conferences." *TESOL Quarterly*. 24(3). 443-460.
- Harris, Muriel and Silva, Tony. (1993). Tutoring ESL students: issues and options. *College Composition and Communication*. 44(4). 525-536.
- Powers, Judith K. and Nelson, Jane V. (1995). L2 writers and the writing center: a national survey of writing center conferencing at graduate institutions. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. 4(2). 113-138.
- Richardson, Paul. (1994). "New perspectives on writing conferences." *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. 17(1). 73-80.

Conferencing about student writing is very relevant to my current position teaching English. I am a tutor for a Rhetoric and Writing Studies (RWS) 95 class, and meet on a one-to-one basis with students frequently. Each student is required to conference with me at least once during the semester; however, most students have met with me on a more consistent basis. I feel that the individualized attention given in conferences is an important aspect to improving writing skills. After reading the articles regarding conferencing, it became apparent that the teacher or tutor engaging in this dialogue has the potential to make the time valuable to the student, improving his writing skills. Additionally, the teacher or tutor has the potential to make the session less productive through means such as dominating the talk and agenda. Knowing what is most useful to help students, and understanding how the teacher or tutor can affect the conferencing session both negatively and positively were goals that I wanted to accomplish through this paper. When I teach my own class in the near future, I would like to utilize this information when engaging in teacher-student conferences to better assist my students. Additionally, I intend to share the findings with my

class tutor in hopes that the generalizations from the research will help him/her when conferencing students.

### Article Summaries & Evaluations

The first article, by Powers and Nelson (1995), discusses a research study regarding writing centers throughout the nation. Data for the article was gathered via a questionnaire sent to writing centers throughout the nation. The survey was mailed to 110 graduate institutions across the nation, and 75 (67%) of them responded. The purpose of this study was to discuss “the kinds of L2 writers writing centers serve, the training of writing center staff for L2 conferencing, the types of assistance L2 writers most frequently request, the differences writing centers perceive in working with L1 and L2 graduate writers, and the difficulties they encounter in meeting the needs of L2 clientele” (Powers & Nelson, 1995: 113). One conclusion drawn from analysis of the data is that there is a growing demand for ESL conferencing. The study focused on graduate writing students, and indicated that the most frequent request for L2 writing assistance dealt with students’ master thesis. Native English speaking students tended to request help with organization of their papers, whereas L2 English speakers focused more on correctness and style. Powers and Nelson also discuss the importance of understanding the different needs of L2 English writers. “First, the majority of writing centers nationwide operate under staffing conditions that make effective training for L2 conferencing especially difficult: a regular turnover of conferencing staff, accompanied, almost inevitably, by relative inexperience” (Powers & Nelson, 1995: 128). In other words, the demand for ESL conferencing tutors exceeds the need. In addition, the tutors were not trained or did not have the experience necessary to address the needs of the ESL writers. The needs of L1 and L2 writers differ, and to be a successful tutor one must acquire an understanding of the unique needs of L2 writers. “L2 conferencing proficiency, like L2 writing proficiency, comes slowly, over time and with experience” (Powers & Nelson, 129). This quote suggests that even if short training sessions were implemented, the high turnover rate and relative lack of experience that the tutors in writing centers have may be negatively affecting the feedback that the L2 writers are receiving from the abundance of inexperienced tutors.

I felt that this article was very good. The research brings up important arguments in regards to the insufficient training of ESL tutors. Those who implement policy or make decisions regarding tutor training would benefit from reading this article. It is apparent that those who tutor ESL students need to have training specific to that field. The needs of the students will be better met with better trained tutors. In addition to increased training, tutors should be given more incentives to remain in their current positions. The longer one tutors, the more proficient one becomes at the job. I personally feel that my tutoring skills have improved drastically since I began this past summer. The more experience I have, and the more questions and situations that I am involved in with students have improved my abilities greatly. In addition, I feel more confident that I can answer student questions, and that my suggestions for paper improvement are valid. With this high turn over rate, the students do not

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receive the expertise of a more knowledgeable, competent tutor. This may result in a less effective, less meaningful conferencing session.

In the second article, Harris and Silva (1993) discuss the interaction between students who are English language learners and tutors at writing centers, and give suggestions to tutors. The article uses findings and examples from several different studies to support the arguments and suggestions made. The first section of the article focuses on error types, and what tutors should correct. Harris and Silva suggest beginning the conferencing session by expressing a positive aspect of the student's paper. From there, the article recommends categorizing errors between global and local, giving priority to the first. The article also discusses the cultural differences in writing styles that may be prevalent in papers' of students from certain cultures, particularly Asian. Additionally, cultural differences in regards to body language and contact, as well as cultural assumptions such as appropriate times to arrive are discussed. One important point in the article is in regards to the differences in composing styles between native and non-native speakers. The tentative findings are that ESL writers "plan less, write with more difficulty (primarily due to lack of lexical resources), reread what they have written less, and exhibit less facility in revising by ear" (Harris & Silva, 529). Suggestions are made for tutors to encourage students to lengthen the time they spend planning, composing and editing their work. Additionally, it is recommended that tutors focus on rhetorical matters before linguistic ones, as this sequence is perceived to be beneficial to the ESL writer. Helping the student to develop strategies to strengthen his writing skills on his own is also advantageous to the student.

This article is extremely beneficial to tutors. It gives specific examples regarding problems that tutors may have as well as solutions. Harris and Silva make suggestions about what to focus on and give priority to, and give reasons as to why something is important. Anybody who is planning on tutoring or teaching would benefit from reading this article. I felt that the generalizations were helpful; additionally, Harris and Silva make a point that tutors and teachers should be careful to not over-generalize as each student is unique.

The article by Cumming and So (1996) addresses "the dynamics of problem solving through spoken discourse in one-to-one tutoring of second language writing, aiming to determine if these processes might vary according to the instructional approach or the language of communication utilized" (197). The study focused on text revision and consisted of 20 students, each receiving four individual tutoring sessions. Two sessions were in English, and two in the L1 of the student. Additionally, one session in each language utilized the procedural facilitation method and the other error correction. Procedural facilitation focuses on prompting students to help them discover corrections to errors themselves. Error correction deals with explaining the error to the student without encouraging the student to rectify the error on his own. The study shows that discourse patterns are similar for both approaches and in both the L1 and L2 of the student. Additionally, the article discusses discourse analysis of conferencing sessions between the tutor and student.

These figures ranged from students *identifying* 52% to 32% of the problems in the writing in comparison with tutors *identifying* 68% to 75% of such problems, students *leading negotiations* in 35% to 45% of these transactions in comparison with tutors *leading* 55% to 65% of these *negotiations* (often in fact preventing the potential for students to negotiate), and students *resolving* 30% to 45% of the problems compared with tutors *resolving* 55% to 70% of these problems. (Cumming & So, 1996: 210)

Additionally, the study shows that students and tutors tend to concentrate most on grammar rules, spelling, and word choice. Regarding language preference, Cumming and So suggest that tutoring in the mother tongue gives students a greater opportunity to link the two languages, analyzing features. They also felt that the tutoring discourse sequence appeared to be similar to classroom discourse of the IRE sequence (initiation, response, evaluation).

This was another very helpful article. It highlighted the dominance of the tutor in the conferencing sessions. Teachers and tutors would benefit from reading this article as they may not be aware of the extent to which they dictate the agenda of the conferencing session. Additionally, the study indicated that using the students' L1 in writing conference did not result negatively on the student, but rather the authors concluded that this may be a positive occurrence. The primary focus on grammar, spelling, and word choice was an important aspect of the article. These language features need to be addressed; however, it is generally recommended that focusing on content and format first is beneficial to the student.

The fourth article that I reviewed was written by Ferris (1995) focused on written comments of teachers, but is significant to conferencing in that there are noteworthy misunderstandings in written comments, which might encourage conferencing sessions to alleviate the confusion. The study focused on teachers' written comments in a multiple-draft essay context, whereas previous research had mainly dealt with a single-draft context. According to this study, students pay more attention to teacher comments on first drafts of multiple-draft compositions. In addition, students who are required to revise their essays pay more attention to comments, even on final drafts where revision was not expected. The study indicates that students take the feedback from their teachers seriously, respecting their opinions and appreciating their effort. However, many students reported that they went to outside sources to assist them in understanding or responding to the teacher's comments. "Students reported receiving and paying the most attention to feedback on grammar, content, and organization, in that order" (Ferris, 1995: 48). Additionally, the study indicates the importance of providing positive feedback to students.

Though this study was helpful from a written comment point of view, it did not focus to the extent that I expected on student misunderstandings of teacher comments. The article was still very good, and would be beneficial to any teacher or tutor who writes comments on student essays. One of the most enlightening parts of the article discussed the impact that teacher comments had on students. Positive comments often times made quite an impact on students, as they remembered specific examples of praise given by the teacher. In addition, some negative comments had an impact on students. "Several wrote rather bitterly that their

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teachers' comments were all negative and that this fact depressed them and decreased their motivation and self-esteem" (Ferris, 1995:46). This statement really had an affect on me, and made me very aware of the power of feedback. Often times I do not think that tutors and teachers realize the impact that they can have on students.

The study done by Goldstein and Conrad (1990) examined characteristics of individual conferences between the teacher of an advanced ESL composition class and three of her students from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, it looked at how the students dealt with revisions of the drafts discussed in the conferences. Data was collected by taping the conferences (with student permission), transcribing the results orthographically, and analyzing both the discourse of the transcription as well as each draft of each students' paper to determine revision. The article indicates that there is a great difference in the degree to which each student provides input in regards to both agenda setting and interactional discourse. Additionally, students varied in the amount of meaning clarification. The results of the study show a positive relationship between negotiation and successful revision. "In contrast, when the students did not negotiate (i.e., when the teacher made revision suggestions and the student backchanneled), the subsequent revisions were often either unsuccessful or not attempted at all" (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990: 454). This study shows the importance of negotiation of meeting in teacher-student conference.

I felt that this was another useful article. It indicated the individual differences that students bring to a conference that could affect the discourse. In addition, it showed that students who negotiate meaning are more likely to have successful revisions. Once again, those who are teaching or tutoring would benefit from this type of article. When I conference with students, often times I can tell that they do not understand the point that I am making but are simply backchanneling. One of the reasons this occurs, I believe, is cultural differences. Certain cultures feel that it is negative to question a teacher. Though I am not their teacher in the typical sense, I am teaching them during the conferencing sessions. When I explain why there is an error, even if the student does not understand, he often will backchannel indicating an affirmative. This study indicates that students are significantly more likely to be successful with their revisions if they negotiate meaning, which is more likely to occur if they feel comfortable expressing that they still do not understand, even after one explanation. These individual differences are important, and teachers should be aware of the individual circumstances that each student brings and try to adjust their style accordingly. Conferencing the same way for each student is not adequate to address the needs of the individuals.

Richardson's article (1994) discusses several previous studies about writing conferences. The purpose of the study was to discuss the interaction of conferencing and how it varies from that of the classroom. The first study cited indicates that conferences are dominated by the teacher, as is often the case in the classroom. "To their surprise, the researchers found that the longer, seemingly more substantial conferences were sustained by the degree to which the student's text already matched the teacher's schema and the nature of the interpersonal relationship between the student and the teacher" (Richardson, 1994: 74). An ad-

ditional study indicates that despite a teacher's feeling that she treats all students the same, conferences differ depending upon the students. Another study shows that teachers are not aware of the extent to which they dominate conferences. Writing conferences were also shown to focus mainly on correction of errors indicated by the teacher. Another study indicates that the dynamics of conferencing changes over time. During the first half of a six-week writing course, conferences were dominated by the IRE sequence. However, during the second half of the course, students controlled and participated more in the discourse than previously. The article then indicates the need to look more closely at how we evaluate writing conferences, and mentions another study that suggests that who is agenda setting and steering may be a better analysis of conferencing than ratio of teacher to student talk.

This article was the least useful out of the six. It gave a rather brief summary of several articles about conferencing; however, I did not feel that an adequate amount of information was given for each study. As a quick overview, it was sufficient, but I found myself wanting more information about the validity and circumstances of each study. I felt that the articles he mentions may have over-generalized findings, as they seem to be about individual cases rather than larger research studies. However, there are several significant points that are made. For example, the awareness of how much a teacher perceives and actually speaks in one-on-one student conferences and how that could affect the conferencing in a negative way. I think that people who are interested in the topic of conferencing would benefit from this article, as it gives a springboard of other articles to look into more closely. Additionally, a teacher or tutor who does not make time to read several studies may benefit from the short results report of this article.

## Discussion

The articles reviewed are in order from general tutoring to more specific teacher-student interaction in a conferencing environment. The Powers and Nelson article deals with an overview of conferencing centers throughout the nation. This is followed by Harris and Silva's discussion of general issues that tutors in writing centers may encounter. From there, Ferris' article deals more specifically with teacher-student dynamics, focusing on written comments, rather than interaction. Goldstein and Conrad discuss the interaction between teacher and student in a conferencing situation. Then the review is concluded with the Richardson article, which gives several specific results of studies between teachers and students in a conferencing setting.

A few of the articles discuss the inexperience of tutors who engage in writing conferences. The Powers and Nelson article dealt more with problems that graduate students may encounter with writing centers. The biggest problem seemed to be with the lack of training and experience that tutors at writing centers have. The importance of experience was emphasized. Additionally, the Harris and Silva article seemed to reiterate this idea. Its target reading population seemed to be that of the tutors the writing centers from the Powers and

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Nelson article employ. This article dealt with specific examples and helpful instruction that the novice tutor would benefit from knowing.

Goldstein and Conrad discuss previous studies that indicated ESL students have difficulty understanding teachers' written comments. This was one of the reasons they performed the study, as students were unclear as to the teachers' meaning. When the meaning was clear, or when the student negotiated meaning during the conference, successful revisions were more likely. Though the Ferris article did not discuss the misunderstanding of teacher comment to the extent I would have liked, the parallel between these two articles is important. Student reaction to teacher comments is a factor in conferencing. The students who perceived that they had no positive comments on their essays may feel better during conferencing if the suggestion that was made in the Harris and Silva article about starting off conferences on a positive note was utilized. I think that a student's perception of his writing is a significant factor in whether his writing improves. When he feels he is doing well, and that the writing process is positive, his motivation for writing will increase. However, if his esteem is lowered, and he feels he is only getting negative feedback, this may decrease his motivation, thus hindering his writing improvement.

Additionally, the teacher dominance of conferences is an important issue. As indicated in the Richardson article, teachers may not realize the degree to which they overpower conferencing sessions. On a similar note, the Goldstein and Conrad article discussed the importance of student participation in the conference and its affect on improved revisions. If teachers dominate the agenda and the amount of discourse, the students may be less likely to have an opportunity to negotiate meaning, which increases their chances of producing a successful revision. Additionally, the Cumming and So article indicated the percentages to which tutors and students prevailed in particular discourse structures. Overwhelmingly, the tutor dominated each aspect that was studied (identifying, leading negotiations, and resolving). This study indicated that tutors leading the negotiations may have prevented the students from negotiating meaning, which the Goldstein and Conrad article showed as being significantly important.

The type of interaction in writing conferences was shown as similar to classroom discourse in several articles. The Richardson article discussed a study that indicated the IRE sequence is prevalent, at least in the first sessions, of conferencing. This is contradicting to what one may have predicted as the conferencing session is often thought of as a one-on-one discussion where the student can more openly discuss concerns, ask questions, and participate in meaningful discourse with the instructor. However, the dynamics of the classroom appear to parallel that of the conferencing session in many cases. In addition to the discussion in the Richardson article, the Cumming and So article also mentions the IRE sequence prevalent in conferences. Additionally, Goldstein and Conrad suggest that there are variations with individual students in regards to how they interact with the teacher during a conferencing session. They suggest that while students *may* add additional input to a conference, set the agenda, or negotiate meaning, they also may chose not to. It could be a students' individual differences, teachers' different treatment of students, or, more likely, a combination

of both of these factors. Goldstein and Conrad discuss several cultural characteristics of students that may affect the discourse structure of conferences.

In addition, the content of discussion in writing conferences focused primarily on sentence level errors. The Ferris article indicates “it is program policy that teachers focus on content and organization in their feedback on first drafts, saving grammatical and mechanical concerns for final drafts” (1995: 37). However, Ferris also indicates that the students felt that they received the most comments on grammar. This could be because the content and organization comments can be stated in a relatively short manner, whereas the grammar errors may be more frequent. Additionally, Cumming and So discuss that tutors’ and students’ main focus is regarding grammar rules, spelling and word choice. The Harris and Silva article also suggests that the tutor focus on rhetorical matters prior to linguistic ones. They even recommend that tutors be firm about this sequenced approach. However, despite the recommendations and policies in place, studies indicate that these sentence level errors account for an abundance of conferencing time. Powers and Nelson also discuss the overwhelming amount of grammar correction in relation to substance or organization. They suggest that the content of the masters thesis are specialized to the point that the tutors do not understand the content, thus they default to focusing on grammar. However, even if tutors understood the content, indicted by other studies and student requests, it is likely that the focus would remain on sentence level corrections.

There were several overlapping themes throughout the articles reviewed: lack of tutor experience and training, unclear meaning in teacher comments, teacher dominance of conferencing sessions, and the focus on sentence level errors despite the recommendations to primarily concentrate on organization and content. Awareness of such inconsistencies as well as further study in these areas would be beneficial to both teachers and students.

