

Article

# Writing Tutor Perceptions of Training Needs for Supporting Students Using English as an Additional Language

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## **Abstract**

Growing numbers of international students and newcomers attending post-secondary studies mean that there are more students using English as an additional language (EAL) at Canadian universities. Consequently, writing centres have recognized the need for specialized training for their tutors as they support these students. However, it is difficult to find research on tutor perspectives about these training programs in a Canadian context. The current project aimed to gather insight regarding tutors' perceived knowledge and needs in helping students using EAL with their writing. Twelve writing tutors completed a questionnaire in which they were asked about their previous EAL experiences, their current understanding of tutoring students using EAL, and their training needs in this area. A qualitative analysis revealed that tutors hoped to develop their ability in explaining grammatical rules, as well as improve their communication skills and develop pedagogical skills. These identified areas of development suggest a need to establish formal training, such as interactive workshops, in additional language acquisition theory, language awareness, and intercultural communication strategies to improve support for students using EAL.

## **Introduction**

In Canada, increasing numbers of students using English as an additional language (EAL) are enriching the language diversity of English-medium university campuses across the country. Some of these students are newcomers to Canada and are part of record levels of immigration to Canada in recent years (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2018). For example, in cities such as Vancouver, approximately 30% of the population speaks a language other than English or French at home (Statistics Canada, 2012). In addition to newcomers using English as an additional language, international students also represent a growing demographic within Canadian universities (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Recent studies suggest that students using EAL may benefit from extracurricular resources to support the acquisition of the advanced levels of academic writing skills that contribute to successful educational outcomes (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012; Chang & Goldrick-Jones, 2019). While writing centres can provide one resource for students to develop academic writing proficiency, studies suggest that writing tutors may require specialized knowledge and skills to work more effectively with these students to avoid resorting to deficit-based approaches that focus on negative perceptions related to students' skills.

## **Knowledge and Skills Required to Work with EAL Students in the Writing Centre**

Existing studies have focused on effective practices for working with EAL students, but few studies to date have inquired into tutors' awareness of effective strategies to support additional language acquisition and academic writing proficiency, or their perceptions of their own training needs. In the existing literature on the needs of writers using EAL, two themes frequently emerge as supporting this student population: direct approaches and flexible approaches.

### **Direct Approaches**

Since the 1990s, scholarship related to writing centres has indicated the importance of tutors being able to recognize when and how to adopt a more direct approach with EAL students, both in their oral communication as well as in guiding them to identify writing issues (see Thonus, 1999; Powers, 1993). In a 2004 review of the literature, Vallejo indicates that collaborative approaches are popular

in working with both EAL and non-EAL students and that such approaches have certain limitations. For example, tutors may not be aware that their tutees using EAL are not familiar with some of the concepts (i.e., audience, argument) that tutors commonly use, and thus the tutees may not profit from the tutoring session. Additionally, tutees with different cultural backgrounds and understandings of how a teacher should behave and teach may not be satisfied with the collaborative approaches often used in writing centres. In a study using interviews, document analysis, and participant observation to examine tutoring dynamics, Vallejo (2004) finds that directive approaches were more commonly used by tutors in practice. In another study, tutors indicate the desire to use less directive approaches but express the need for increased training to help tutees recognize errors independently (Moser, 1993). More recently, Thonus (2014) concludes that tutors struggle with not taking ownership of tutees' work while still using directive approaches. As studies by Williams (2004) and Nakamaru (2010) have noted, there appears to be a lack of alignment between what tutors feel that they can and should offer to EAL students and the type and structure of feedback that is most appropriate to tutees' needs when learning to express their ideas in ways that are valued in academic writing.

### Flexible Approaches

Long a feature in empirical writing centre studies, recent literature has continued to identify the need for flexibility in approaches that tutors take when working with students using EAL (Chang & Goldrick-Jones, 2019). In a 2002 study, Blau, Hall, and Sparks conclude that in order to be effective in working with students using EAL, tutors must be flexible in their role; they may need to act as teachers of both English writing skills and aspects of local culture, as well as be flexible in their ability to address both global and local issues. ("Global" refers to big picture concerns such as organization and logic, while "local" refers to sentence-level concerns with lexis and syntax.) Similarly, in a larger scale study of a writing centre at Nanyang Technological Institute in Singapore (Winder, Kathpalia, & Koo, 2014), the authors note that students using EAL come into a writing centre with both local and global concerns regarding their writing. The authors indicate that tutors must be adept at following the student's goals during a tutoring session and quickly assessing a student's English language proficiency, while subsequently adjusting their approach to the session. Echoing the importance of flexibility, tutors interviewed in Hall (2001) discuss how writing tutors use a multitude of different strategies and approaches in working with EAL students. While flexible approaches are needed for all students, they are especially important when tutoring students using EAL (see also Carter-Tod, 1995).

## Current Trends in Tutor Development for Working with Students Using EAL

Despite the evidence that tutors require special skills and knowledge in order to work effectively with EAL students, the evidence points to tutors not necessarily having access to formal training opportunities to develop these skills. Data on this topic, however, is quite limited. While questions about multilingual support are included in the National Census of Writing, the results do not provide insight into the current state of tutor training. In an older study of writing centres in the United States, Powers and Nelson (1995) found that 28% of centres surveyed offered no training at all related to working with EAL students, while another 14% offered only minimal training. More recently, Moussu (2013) notes improvements in tutor training in the previous decade, but argues that there continues to be a need for greater emphasis on tutor training in effective additional language learning strategies to make writing centres more inclusive spaces. There is evidence that research-based resources to support tutor training are on the rise as texts specifically dedicated to this topic, such as Rafterth and Shanti's (2009) *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* and Reynolds's (2014) *One on one with second language writers: A guide for writing tutors, teachers, and consultants*, have been revised and updated. While several online resources (i.e., worksheets and blog entries) are available, it is unclear whether the information in these resources is supported by research into its effectiveness (e.g., "Using the Film for Writing Tutor Training," n.d.). While tutor training programs have been developed and tested in recent dissertations (e.g., Bell, 2019), there is little available that attempts to incorporate tutors' beliefs about effective additional language acquisition strategies.

It seems that writing centre studies of how best to support EAL students are primarily written from the perspective of writing centre directors. For example, in an early commentary, Lip (1983) advises that tutors be trained in intercultural skills, teaching grammar, and "profiling students' strengths and weaknesses" (p. 1), among other competencies (as cited in Carter-Tod, 1995). Another early piece of advice comes from a writing centre administration handbook which suggests that only a subset of tutors be trained and specialized to work with EAL students (Friedlander, 1984). Building on Friedlander's (1984) ideas, in her study of additional language writing centre tutorials at a large mid-western university in the United States, Taylor (2007) refers to Friedlander's contention that tutors working with post-secondary students using EAL should receive training to "analyze errors, to create controlled sentence combining exercises, and to recognize the rhetorical differences [between cultures]" (p. 11). Similarly, Robinson et al. (1990) suggest that tutors be aware of Kaplan's

(1966) theories on rhetorical patterns, such as linear patterns in English, parallel patterns in Arabic, and circular patterns in Chinese, in order to increase tutors' understanding of the writing styles of various cultures. However, Williams (2004) cautions that tutors should avoid a reductionist understanding of students' identities and writing styles since all students, regardless of language background, may "be indirect, non-linear, and inexplicit in their written expression" (p. 78). Because of the complexity of factors involved in tutoring EAL students, Dooley (2001) recommends that tutors be trained on such complicated topics by EAL instructors with more experience.

There are a few key sources on writing centre tutor training that include tutors' opinions regarding training programs that had already been developed. For example, Kennell (2014) describes how tutors at the Purdue University writing centre used an online platform and complete one hour per week of training for one semester. Their online modules included readings, grammar exercises, videos, reflections, and observations. Kennell reports anecdotally that tutors generally liked the training and felt more comfortable working with EAL students after having completed it. Nowacki (2012) describes a writing centre using Moodle, an online learning management system, to create two ten-week, self-paced training modules for tutors. The tutors used the platform to read about teaching EAL students, to post reflections, and to share resources with other tutors. In the only study that gathered both administrators' and tutors' perspectives on EAL training, Comeau-Kirschner's (2014) dissertation reveals a few key findings relevant to the current study. First, tutors generally felt less prepared to work with students using EAL than with students from non-EAL backgrounds. Moreover, the tutors used "trial and error" (p. 151) approaches in working with EAL students as they had limited knowledge of specific tutoring strategies. Comeau-Kirschner concludes that "limited exposure to ELL [English language learning] best practices literature" results in "a lack of familiarity with the specific differences and needs of that population in comparison to NES [native English speaking] counterparts" (p. 153). Clearly, additional research into tutors' knowledge and experiences in these contexts is needed. Bell's (2019) study of the effectiveness of a scaffolding intervention in tutor training highlights the importance of consulting tutors about their knowledge and experiences. Since it seems that most tutor training programs have been designed prior to understanding tutors' beliefs about additional language acquisition and their own perceived training needs, such training may not accurately target tutors' needs and may not adequately correct tutors' potentially inaccurate beliefs about additional language acquisition. Thus, the present study seeks to identify how tutors understand additional language acquisition, in order to enhance the development of future tutor-training programs. It is hoped that tutors' practices will improve through training that

seeks to align their perceptions regarding additional language acquisition with evidence-based additional language acquisition practices.

## **Research Questions**

Writing centres at English-medium universities in Canada provide a valuable support service for students using EAL. The overall aim of this study is to identify what tutors perceive their needs to be when working with students using EAL in the Canadian post-secondary context. Therefore, the primary research questions are:

1. What knowledge do writing tutors have related to working with students using EAL?
2. What knowledge and skills do tutors want to develop to better serve students using EAL?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Writing tutors (also referred to as writing consultants, advisors, or tutors) working in a writing centre at a public university in British Columbia were invited to complete a questionnaire related to the research questions. All of the writing tutors working at this writing centre were eligible to complete the questionnaire. Out of a total of 17 eligible tutors, 12 completed the questionnaire, resulting in a participation rate of 70.59%.

All of the participants identified as writing tutors, and while the amount of time that each tutor had worked at the writing centre varied between one semester and three years, the majority of the participants had worked at the writing centre for only one semester. With one exception, participants had not participated in any formal EAL training aside from that offered by the writing centre. However, they reported a variety of informal types of training, such as personal experience learning English as an additional language, teaching English abroad, and “on the job learning.” Participants were not asked to report their age or gender.

In regard to personal multilingual experiences, four participants described themselves as being fully multilingual, while three more had some competency in an additional language. The participants who self-reported as multilingual also reported being fluent/competent in languages such as German, Spanish, French, Tagalog, and Mandarin. The remainder of the participants reported speaking only English. The majority of the participants reported having had some experiences tutoring English or other languages outside of the writing centre, including experiences studying

abroad, teaching English to children in other countries, tutoring peers informally, and completing teaching assistantships at the university.

## Research Setting

The writing centre in the current study is located at a research-intensive public university in British Columbia, and is one of several student services provided to improve academic success. At the time of the study, international undergraduate students made up between 10% and 15% of the student population at the research site, with a large number of international students coming from countries such as China, the United States, India, and South Korea.

Clients at the writing centre were required to be undergraduates (graduate students were referred to a separate service) and were asked to bring in their assignment as well as the assignment instructions to their appointments. Typically, two to three tutors would be scheduled to work at the writing centre during the same shift, allowing the centre to provide assistance to multiple students simultaneously. Appointments would take place from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and tutors would meet with students one-on-one for 25 to 50 minutes. After the appointments, tutors would summarize the topics covered in the appointment in an online note visible to the other employees. These notes were typically sent to the student via email in order to refer them to other resources (i.e., online exercises, on-campus resources, etc.). In the 2018/2019 academic year, 36% of the appointments were with students who self-identified as having a first language other than English.

Due to academic integrity concerns, the policies of the writing centre noted that students' work would not be proofread. Instead, the aim of a writing appointment was to improve the students' writing skills and confidence. Writing tutors, however, would work on a variety of topics with the students, including clarifying arguments, improving grammar, and teaching proofreading strategies. At both the initial training and subsequent staff meetings, the supervisors would emphasize strategies to help the tutors focus on improving writing and fostering confidence as a writer as opposed to proofreading. Additional policies of the writing centre included not assisting with take-home exams, having a limit of 100 minutes of consultations per student per week, and not discussing marks that the student may receive or had already received on writing assignments.

The writing tutors employed at the writing centre were mainly undergraduate students completing their English or Psychology degrees (other programs included Creative Writing, History, and Economics); three graduate students were also employed by the writing centre. After being hired, writing tutors were trained prior to the start of the academic year over two full days (separated

by a week). Procedures at the writing centre, tutoring strategies, confidentiality, and working with EAL students were covered in these training sessions. New writing tutors would then shadow an experienced tutor in an appointment before beginning their own appointments with students. Ongoing training was completed at weekly staff meetings, which included lectures from visiting speakers and from writing centre supervisors. Working with students using EAL was also covered at one such session. As another form of ongoing development, writing tutors completed portfolios—which included reflections on assigned readings as well as on past appointments—over the course of each term. At the end of the term, individual meetings were held between writing tutors and supervisors to discuss a tutor's progress.

## Questionnaire

At the start of this project, one of the researchers led a meeting with writing tutors to explore key questions they had about working with EAL students. Next, a literature review was conducted. Based on the workshop and the literature, the researchers then developed a questionnaire to gather the data for this study. The open-ended questions revolved around five main categories: education, professional development and training, previous experience, teaching and learning philosophy, tutoring skills, and future tutoring development and training. A final question allowed participants to write down anything else that they would like to share with the investigators regarding tutoring EAL students in the writing centre. The questionnaire is included in Appendix 1.

## Data Collection

The questionnaire was conducted online via the Qualtrics platform. Participants received an invitation email to complete the questionnaire, and were also informed of the questionnaire in a staff meeting. A reminder email was sent one week after the initial invitation. Participants were instructed to click on a link to the questionnaire in the email to provide informed consent. Participants were able to complete the questionnaire, which was approximately 45 minutes in length, from any location. No compensation, beyond that which they would receive within the normal course of their employment, was provided, and all procedures were approved by the appropriate university ethics board.

## Data Analysis

A qualitative approach was taken for the analysis of the questionnaire data (Mills & Gay, 2016). The analysis was carried out by two researchers, working first alone and then in collaboration. Data were first examined for units of meaning (sentences and phrases which could stand on their own as pieces of information). After a preliminary review of the data, both researchers separately coded the units of meaning and gathered those codes into emerging themes related to the topic at hand. To mitigate bias and avoid predetermining the codes, the researchers allowed codes to emerge as each unit of meaning was examined; that is, they did not start with a list of specific codes they were looking for in the data. Rather, as the researchers worked with the data, they determined which code might best describe each unit of meaning. The researchers then gathered related codes into larger themes. Once the preliminary analysis was complete, the researchers compared the two sets of codes and emerging themes. There was a high level of agreement between the researchers regarding the codes and themes, and any discrepancies were resolved through consensus. To determine the most salient themes in the data, the number of units of meaning associated with each theme was counted, with results reported in order of importance. In reporting the results, representative quotes associated with the coded units of meaning are used to illustrate the themes. Quotes are reported exactly as provided by the recipients, and they may contain non-standard English. However, minor typographical errors have been corrected to facilitate ease of reading.

## Results

### Tutor Knowledge for Working with Students Using EAL

**Length of Time to Learn EAL.** The participants had a wide variety of opinions as to how long it would take for a person to become proficient in communicative and then academic English. For communication purposes, four participants commented that it would take about four years to learn English, while two others believed it would take less than two years. However, participants noted that the length of time may vary due to several factors, including the English language learner's age, commitment level, and the amount of practice that they would have. For students to become proficient in English for academic purposes, participants noted that it would take longer than simply learning the language for the purpose of communication. Three participants estimated it would take approximately three to five years to become proficient while another two participants claimed it

would take a year or less. Again, the tutors noted the importance of practice and immersion as factors in the length of time it would take to learn the language.

**Methods for Improving English Language Skills.** Immersion in the language, interacting with others, and seeking feedback were three key themes that emerged from the data in relation to how the participants thought students could improve their general English language skills. Participants predominantly believed that the best way for students to learn and improve their English would be through immersion. One participant remarked “I heard that surrounding yourself with the language helps and I think it does.” There were a variety of ways that participants noted that students could immerse themselves in the language; for example, receiving any sort of media input was a common suggestion. Noting the importance of enjoyment within language learning, one participant commented, “Watch TV with subtitles. This way it’s interesting to them, they will want to watch it, but they will also be studying the language in order to improve their familiarity and comfort with the language.” Other recommended means of immersion included watching videos, listening to music, and listening to podcasts. A second common suggestion within the theme of immersion was to read books. Several participants commented that reading provides information about English grammar, vocabulary, and writing style.

Participants also widely commented on the importance of interacting with others in order to improve one’s English. However, they noted that such interactions involve students being required to push themselves out of their comfort zones. For example, one participant stated, “I also think they would have to force themselves to speak English to their friends consistently to practice conversation, speaking to both native speakers and those who speak their first language.” Interacting with others in another language would often involve receiving corrective feedback, which participants believed would be helpful for the additional language learner. Nonetheless, they noted that feedback must either be received from someone with whom the learner feels comfortable (i.e., a friend) or must be constructive. One participant noted that EAL students should “ask their friends to openly and actively tell them when there is something that could be improved.”

**Methods for Improving Academic Writing Skills.** For students using EAL, the participants thought that practising, reading, seeking feedback, and focusing on specific skills all contributed to improving academic writing skills. The predominant theme that emerged was that practice was the most important aspect of writing improvement, with one tutor stating “practice, practice, practice writing.” Along with practice, participants urged English language learners to read as much as possible, claiming “students can become more proficient writers by reading the work of others.” There were several reasons that participants thought reading may be helpful. For example, one tutor noted that

reading “allows them to become more familiar with the style of writing that might be relevant to their discipline and exposes them to academic vocabulary they might otherwise be unfamiliar with.” Another participant wrote that reading improves the students’ comfort level with writing, saying “reading things that relate to their subject can give them the confidence to write about it.” Participants also urged students who were learning English to expose themselves to corrective feedback on their writing. One tutor recommended that EAL students look for resources that may give them feedback within their community, such as tutoring and making use of the writing centre. Finally, there was a sense in the data that EAL students should focus on developing particular writing skills, such as sentence structure and argumentation, in order to improve their overall writing ability. Along these lines, one participant commented:

Working as a writing consultant at the [writing centre], I find that the majority of EAL students are concerned with their grammar, as opposed to having an effective argument. Learning to proofread one's paper is beneficial; however, I believe that EAL students should approach English writing with the idea that grammar (within reason) should be secondary to clearly expressing their ideas and arguments.

**Challenges Facing Students Learning EAL.** The themes that emerged from the data that related to the challenges of learning EAL include: implicit rules, formal writing conventions, grammatical aspects, and writing organization. Participants overwhelmingly believed that difficulties may arise in learning the “unspoken rules” that appear to govern the English language. One advisor explained this theme succinctly: “I think concepts people with English as their first language naturally learn are the most difficult for students using EAL—things you have to experience or just memorize.” Participants responded that unspoken rules could apply to various aspects of learning the English language such as grammar, organization, word use, and spelling, with one participant claiming that challenges might arise with learning “what is academic and what is not. Often, for native English speakers, understanding the unspoken rules comes naturally and it can be difficult, at least in my case, to explain these ideas to EAL students.”

Participants claimed that other challenges might arise when learning English, with some of those challenges falling within the context of unspoken rules. For example, one tutor noted that “the expectations of formal writing (which differs from conversational English)” might be difficult. Another participant noted that learning grammar may be difficult, because “unless learning [grammar] in school, teachers don’t always take the time to go into the minutiae of it.” Tutors discussed several specific aspects of grammar that students using EAL may struggle with, such as punctuation, conjugation, and article use. Finally, organization was noted as a challenge, with one

participant writing that it may be difficult to “[organize] ideas and sentences in a clear and logical way.” Overall, unspoken rules (i.e., aspects of the language that seem to come naturally to speakers of English as a first language) were the most common challenges and could encompass other aspects of the language, such as grammar.

## Participants' Perceived Development Needs

Tutors identified several areas in which they would like to improve their ability to support students using EAL. Key themes included: developing skills to explain grammar and sentence structure, a desire for better communication skills (related to grammar, feedback, and intercultural communication), and specific teaching skills (related to instructional strategies, theory, and educational priorities).

**Additional Training for Academic Writing Support Related to Specific Skills.** When presented with a list of options for additional training in specific aspects of academic writing, the participants prioritized developing skills to better explain grammar and sentence structure to students using EAL. In explaining their rationale for this prioritizing, tutors often mentioned these topics in conjunction with each other, and many tutors noted that they had trouble explaining these topics to students using EAL. One tutor wondered, “some grammar aspects (such as prepositions) are difficult to teach as many don’t have a specific rule or the explanation is not a simple one. Are there ways to teach grammar without simply telling the student the rule?” In regard to both grammar and sentences, tutors also mentioned that students using EAL commonly had questions and some confusion about these topics. For example, a tutor noted that “a lot of students come in with questions about sentence structure and I’m not sure how to explain it to them in a way that makes sense.” Tutors did not specify many aspects of grammar or sentences in which they wanted additional training, although several did note that they struggled with explaining sentence structure. They were also interested in more training in mechanics, vocabulary, and instructional strategies; however, the interest in grammar and sentences exceeded the other categories by far.

**Additional Training for Instructional Strategies for Teaching EAL.** When presented with a list of options for developing instructional strategies for working with EAL students, the participants prioritized communication skills (explaining grammar, giving feedback, and intercultural communication) and specific teaching skills (strategies, theories, and priorities). In justifying their prioritizing of communication skills, many tutors felt they needed more training in order to explain grammar to students. For example, an advisor noted that it would be useful to have more training in

explaining grammatical rules “so I can be a bit more helpful when students are trying to effectively learn new material.” Other tutors requested more training in providing feedback that is directed toward future learning, and in evaluating their students. One tutor said, “I’d like to know how to make a manageable plan for improvement and deliver this plan without coming off too harsh,” while another stated that training in providing feedback for future learning would be useful because “it’s difficult to teach [students using EAL] applicable skills that are universal because every little issue is so different....” Finally, several tutors desired further training in intercultural communication. One advisor stated, “so much of the job depends on communicating effectively with others, and cultural barriers can be a major obstacle to that.” All in all, in addition to further training in specific skills related to academic writing, such as understanding grammar and sentence structure, the tutors in this study also expressed a wish for more training related to general instructional strategies that could develop better communication with their students using EAL.

The tutors also prioritized learning more about specific teaching skills. For example, several tutors requested training in a wide range of instructional strategies for working with EAL students. Other tutors requested more training in understanding theories of EAL instruction. Finally, tutors also requested training on identifying and prioritizing aspects of student writing to focus on. For example, a tutor wrote, “Generally, if a student has a lot of time before the paper is due, I will gear the focus towards the larger issues (argument, thesis, etc.). If there is little time, we focus on grammar. However, I would like to learn different approaches to these situations.”

**Preferred Modes for Tutor Development.** When asked about preferred modes for additional training, participants indicated a preference for interactive training, such as workshops and staff meetings, and credit-bearing courses. In terms of interactive opportunities, a large subset of responses noted a preference for training in a workshop setting. One tutor wrote, “In person events are more engaging; I also internalize verbal messages better than written ones,” while another said, “I appreciate workshops. I like the presentation and engagement format. It helps me learn.” Tutors also enjoyed training within staff meetings, with one advisor noting, “I learn better with others and participating in activities with others.” Finally, several other responses indicated that for-credit courses would be a useful method of training. One participant wrote, “I find that if there is a benefit to me (not to be selfish) that I am more interested in spending the time and effort to improve my tutoring skills.”

## **Discussion and Implications**

The growing number of international students studying at Canadian English-language universities means that writing centre tutors will be called upon to support a diverse group of students. Consequently, writing tutors can benefit from acquiring specialized skills to ensure they can help students from all linguistic backgrounds achieve their desired educational outcomes. The data from the current study indicate that the participants' beliefs about additional language acquisition focus on language immersion. Specifically, tutors believe that a great deal of EAL learning occurs through exposure to English books, movies, and conversations with non-EAL speakers. However, tutors' perceptions of their own training needs differed from this perspective. In fact, tutors' responses focused heavily on the need for increased training in teaching grammar and sentence structure.

Tutors' beliefs about additional language acquisition placed a high value on prolonged exposure to the language as being critical to learning. However, these responses downplay the role of teachers and other interlocutors in the process and leave much of the responsibility with the EAL learners to acquire the language on their own. Similarly, the responses appear to suggest that language and unspoken academic rules can be learned through immersion in the language and the target discipline. Such responses suggest that the tutors lack an understanding of the crucial role that correction techniques play in additional language learning (Ellis, 2002; Norris & Ortega, 2000). This knowledge gap may be due to a lack of formal grounding among the participants in theories of additional language acquisition and the role of sympathetic interlocutors who make accommodations such as slower speech and repetition to aid the process of negotiating meaning (Long 1996; Gass & Mackey, 2007). Therefore, future training workshops may want to begin by providing tutors with a background in additional language acquisition so that they can have a more nuanced view of the challenges confronting EAL writers and the role that their advising sessions play in this process.

While tutors perceived additional language acquisition as occurring mainly through exposure, their perceived training needs indicate that tutors recognize the value of offering direct and indirect instruction. However, their responses suggest that they do not have the adequate metalinguistic knowledge required to deliver explicit instruction related to the naming of grammatical forms. In light of this finding, writing centres could provide language awareness training to the tutors to help them develop their metalinguistic knowledge so that they can more clearly explain the language. If they are able to more fluently talk about the language, they will likely feel more confident drawing on diverse approaches to feedback, such as those identified in Ellis's (2008) typology of corrective feedback. Such language awareness workshops could be facilitated by an EAL practitioner with

extensive knowledge of instructional strategies such as guided discovery; this would answer Comeau-Kirschner's (2014) call to conduct tutor training sessions like EAL classes to help demonstrate the effectiveness of EAL instructional approaches over approaches more typically used with writers from non-EAL backgrounds.

As such, the most striking finding in the current paper is the wide disconnect between tutors' beliefs about additional language acquisition and tutors' perceived training needs. In other words, tutors' explicit beliefs regarding additional language acquisition focus on immersion and exposure to the language. However, tutors' implicit beliefs about additional language acquisition indicate some understanding that directive feedback is important to language acquisition. For example, tutors believed that more training in explaining grammatical rules would be useful. The findings of this study can also be compared to those of an unpublished dissertation (Geither, 2010) which surveyed ten writing tutors, four of whom had significant training in fields related to additional language acquisition. In the study, Geither found that both tutors and EAL students focused on grammar as a main concern. More interestingly, the author found that the tutors surveyed at one research site provided mainly directive feedback while those at a second site provided a mix of directive and non-directive feedback. Given that the tutors in Geither's study were providing some directive feedback, it may be that their beliefs about the importance of such feedback were more explicit than the beliefs of the tutors surveyed in the current study. This difference may have occurred due to the differing training experiences and education of the two sets of tutors. Furthermore, the findings of the current study mirror a recent commentary by Chang and Goldrick-Jones (2019) who note that self-correction is a common mode of instruction in writing centres but may result in increased stress for EAL students. The authors question whether providing editing help would be inappropriate in such cases. Thus, the commentary indicates that an implicit understanding of the importance of directive feedback is common, but that such feedback may be avoided in writing centres due to academic integrity concerns. Therefore, tutor training might seek to bring tutors' implicit beliefs about additional language learning to the forefront, back them up with empirical evidence, and provide tutors with strategies for directive feedback.

The participants' responses also appear to value the need to be culturally responsive to students using EAL. To support tutors in this area, workshops related to fostering intercultural communicative competence could be conducted. According to Byram (1997), linguistic competence and intercultural competence are intertwined and come together to create intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Workshops on fostering an awareness of ICC could both introduce useful communication strategies and highlight the tutors' dual roles as language and cultural informants (Thonus, 2014).

Training programs which take a holistic approach to advisor training are more likely to produce tutors who are both capable language informants and, more importantly, sympathetic interlocutors—a crucial, yet often overlooked, aspect of additional language acquisition and workplace training programs (Douglas, Doe, & Cheng, 2020). Moreover, the participants' responses show a clear preference for workshops that are in-person and interactive along with resources which can be accessed online. These perspectives match the findings of earlier studies cited above (Kennell, 2014; Nowacki, 2012). Consequently, writing centres may want to also implement training programs which reinforce face-to-face workshops with online self-access tools such as useful links and training videos.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

The findings demonstrate that there is a disconnect between tutors' explicit and implicit beliefs regarding additional language acquisition in the current study. Such results point to the need for further exploration. Future studies might seek to determine how such a disconnect impacts tutors' work with clients. For example, studies might explore how tutors interact with EAL students, and whether they incorporate additional language learning instructional strategies such as directive feedback into sessions, as per their implicit beliefs, or promote immersion in the additional language, as per their explicit beliefs. Although the data collection methods provide a rich description of the tutors' perceptions, the fact that the current study was conducted with a small group of writing tutors at a specific writing centre prevents the formation of broad generalizations about the experiences and practices of tutors at other writing centres. However, a number of significant themes arising in the participants' anecdotes demonstrate a degree of saturation with regard to the tutors' perspectives on and insights into their own levels of knowledge and needs. Based on the findings of the current study, future studies might explore the impact of specific training interventions on tutor practice, as was explored recently in Bell's (2019) dissertation. Such studies could lend weight to the efficacy of such programs. Studies might also set out to capture and share tutor experiences to model and practice what tutors can do during a tutoring session to support EAL students. The availability of such self-narratives would provide necessary insight to inform future writing tutor training and support. Furthermore, the current study used a questionnaire developed by the authors based on the themes in the scholarly writing centre literature. The responses of the writing tutors focused heavily on micro-writing skills such as grammar. In order to further develop the findings, it would be useful

to explicitly question tutors on different aspects of writing, such as invention. Future studies might seek to conduct semi-structured interviews focusing specifically on such topics.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Education, Professional Development, and Training**

What formal training or education have you completed related to teaching EAL?

What informal training or professional development have you completed related to teaching EAL?

### **Previous Experience**

What languages do you speak? How well do you speak them?

Describe any experience you have living, studying, working, or travelling where the majority language was other than English.

Describe any experience you have teaching or tutoring English or another additional language.

### **Teaching and Learning Philosophy**

Describe the best method for learning English as an additional language.

Thinking about academic writing in particular, how can students using EAL become more proficient writers in English?

How long does it take to become proficient in an additional language for everyday communication purposes?

How long does it take to become proficient in an additional language for academic purposes?

### **Tutoring Skills**

What do you think is the biggest challenge for students using EAL when writing in English?

How confident are you in your ability to tutor students using EAL?

What aspects of tutoring students using EAL are you most comfortable with?

What aspects of tutoring students using EAL challenge you the most?

What expectations do you think students using EAL have when entering a tutoring session? How prepared do you feel to meet those expectations?

How would you describe your role as a tutor working with students using EAL? Is it any different than your role tutoring students from English speaking backgrounds?

What resources do you typically consult if you want to check a specific aspect of writing or grammar to help you work with students using EAL?

What resources do you typically recommend to students using EAL who ask for suggestions for improving their writing?

Consider the following aspects of academic writing. Choose the **top two aspects** for which you would like more training and professional development. Provide a rationale for your choices.

- Content: For example: length, development, repetition, logic, generalizations, argumentation, analogies, ideas, sense of audience, register, tone
- Structure: For example, organization, thesis, introductions, main body development, transitions between paragraphs, conclusions, appropriate genre
- Paragraphing: For example, appropriate paragraphs, paragraph development, unity, sentence order, coherence, transitions within paragraphs
- Sentences: For example, fragments, comma splices, run-ons, parallelism, shifts (number, voice, tense, mood), variation, ambiguity, subordination, awkwardness
- Grammar: For example, articles, prepositions, plurals, syntax, grammatical word choice, verbs, pronoun reference, agreement, clauses, parts of speech, infinitives & gerunds
- Vocabulary: For example, word usage, synonyms, padding, redundancy, variation, repetition slang, trite language, appropriate metaphor, appropriate diction, precision, vague language
- Mechanics: For example, spelling, punctuation

Consider the following aspects of teaching EAL. Choose the **top three aspects** for which you would like more training and professional development. Provide a rationale for your choices.

- Theories and research related to additional language teaching and learning
- General instructional strategies
- Specific instructional strategies for teaching additional language writing
- Explaining grammatical rules
- Asking students questions about their work
- Locating and choosing effective EAL support materials
- Evaluating EAL writing
- Providing feedback for future learning
- General communication strategies
- Identifying and prioritizing aspects of student writing to focus on
- Differentiating instruction for different levels of proficiency (e.g. beginner vs. advanced)
- Intercultural communication skills
- Using and recommending technology to support EAL learning
- Writing genres for different disciplines
- Providing constructive feedback
- Identifying and conveying the appropriate language choices
- Identifying student needs
- Helping students set goals
- Knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds
- Knowledge of students' linguistic backgrounds

### **Future Tutor Development and Training**

What is your preferred method of developing your skills as a tutor working with students using EAL?

How many formal hours of professional development or training related to working with students using EAL do you think writing consultants should have per year?

In addition to what is currently available, what other resources would you like to have to support writing consultants working with students using EAL?

### **Further Thoughts**

Do you have anything else you would like to share with the researchers related to tutoring students using EAL in the writing centre?

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