Tutor and student assessments of academic writing tutorials: What is "success"?

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Abstract

The university writing center provides a key support service within the institution, and as such must find ways to evaluate the impact of the instruction they provide. However, many studies of tutorial effectiveness lack adequate analyses of tutorial talk and of both student and tutor interpretations of behavior and outcomes. This study characterizes successful writing tutorials by employing a hybrid methodology, interactional sociolinguistics, combining conversation-analytic and ethnographic techniques. Twelve tutorials, six with native speakers of English (NSs) and six with nonnative speakers (NNSs), were analyzed for features such as topic introduction, type and frequency of directives and their mitigation, volubility, overlaps, backchannels, and laughter. By triangulating this analysis with participant interpretations compiled from interview data, a profile of a "successful" tutorial emerged. Associated with perceived success were conversational turn structure, tutor mitigation of directives, simultaneous laughter, affiliative overlaps, and small talk. In addition, symmetrical interpretations of directive forcefulness and tutor "helpfulness" characterized successful tutorials. Implications of the study are both theoretical and practical. Recommendations are made that tutor preparation and in-service training emphasize less idealized, more pragmatic conceptualizations of tutor roles and actions and focus on behaviors demonstrated as constitutive of success.
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1. Introduction

The university-level writing center, established first in the U.S. as the 1960s' English Department "writing lab" (North, 1984), has developed over the decades into a sophisticated service supporting students in first-year writing programs and beyond across the full range of disciplines. Instructors who evaluate students not only according to their knowledge of subject matter but also their ability to express themselves in writing, consider writing center tutorials a useful if not necessary step towards writing improvement. This is particularly true of instructors who value written expression as the mark of an "educated person," who have themselves worked as tutors, and/or who have collaborated with writing programs in developing writing assignments suitable to their own disciplines (Thonus, 2001).

Academic writing tutorials "fit the bill" as institutional discourse in that interactions pattern as diagnosis + directive + report writing phases, each predicated on evaluation (Agar, 1985; Thonus, 1998). They share certain features with other institutional discourse types such as medical consultations (West, 1990), health-visitor interactions (Heritage & Sefi, 1992), and psychotherapy sessions (Ferrara, 1994). Tutorials also resemble certain academic discourse genres such as advising interviews (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992), counseling sessions (Fiksdal, 1990; He, 1998), and teacher–student writing conferences (Sperling, 1994).

Of these, tutorials most closely approximate writing conferences, yet they differ from them in two fundamental ways. First, tutors are not the tutees' classroom instructors, and thus can neither formally evaluate student papers nor model how students' instructors view the role of writing in their courses. Second, tutor training guides, such as Gillespie and Lerner (2000) and Meyer and Smith (1987) promote the notion that tutors and tutees are of equal status and that tutees have the right and obligation to "call the shots" in tutorial interactions. The reality of tutorial practice, however, differs markedly (Thonus, 1999a, p. 244). Because tutors are motivated, trained, and paid by the institution to improve student writing, their dominance of writing center interaction is therefore predictable, and the "collaborative" dilemmas of tutorial practice understandable (Thonus, 1999b).

In contrast to course instructors, writing tutors "concentrate on broadly constituted principles such as 'good writing' rather than on institutional-, discipline-, or course-specific rules. They must remain neutral with respect to 'higher' rules and are forbidden from evaluating assignments posed by students' instructors or from hazarding a guess as to ultimate evaluations of student writing" (Thonus, 1998, p. 32). This separation of the writing center from the act of formal evaluation is key to "the idea of a writing center" (North, 1984) because an increased focus of resources and personnel on writing assessment would take away from a center's main goal, "to keep students coming in and coming back" (Johnson-Shull & Kelly-Riley, 2001, p. 27). The interaction between writing assessment and

writing support is thus viewed as a "feedback loop," two ostensibly opposing forces operating to establish equilibrium: "Assessment creates and enforces a firm standard, and the Writing Center mitigates the formality by offering a flexible mechanism as a support" (op. cit., 84).

In contrast to this idealistic characterization of tutors who do not evaluate, Thonus (2001) found that tutors criticize course instructors (either tacitly or overtly) on everything from course content to assignment construction to evaluation of student writing precisely because they view themselves as colleague pedagogues. That is, it appears that tutors view instructors, not tutees, as their peers. They therefore assume the right, if not the obligation, to evaluate student writing. Thus, the argument must be made that the writing tutorial is an evaluative act in fact if not by design.

Evaluations of tutoring and of the writing center typically treat students as "clients" and ask them to rate the "services" of the center — usually once a semester at most — and often focus on "repeat clients" only. Bell (2000) termed this approach "consumer-oriented" and proposed five additional alternatives to writing center evaluation: adversary-oriented, management-oriented, naturalistic and participant-oriented, expertise-oriented, and objectives-oriented. Adding her voice to the debate, Yancey (2002) critiqued the outcomes-oriented nature of much writing center assessment: "Too often we talk about what works, but seeing what does not work is every bit as instructive, and is in fact necessary if we are to develop an adequate theory of tutor development" (op. cit., 199). Harris (2002) argued for research performed by writing center administrators that parallels classroom teacher research in its self-critical component.

The assessment of tutorial success falls within the purview of Lerner's (2002) "descriptive assessment" far more than the more "evaluative" assessment of writing centers. Unfortunately, empirical studies in this area are rare, and those that have been published lack credibility due to design flaws (e.g., Walker & Elias, 1987). A recent exception is Jones (2001), who performed a meta-analysis of the existing research on writing center assessment, examining direct and indirect ways in which tutorials can influence student writing performance and the delicate line between measurable and intangible outcomes that researchers must tread. Jones admitted that concrete evidence that writing centers actually improve student writing is difficult to substantiate, so that indirect evidence such as satisfaction surveys are often used instead.

Rarely is writing center assessment connected with assessments of the quality or change(s) in quality of students' writing. Nevertheless, students continue to consult writing center tutors on a voluntary or involuntary basis, and those who return a second time are coming back for more of what they got the first. And tutors continue to do their jobs day after day because they believe they are making a difference in student writing: "A tutor-as-causal-inquirer, in other words, intends to intervene helpfully with students" (Yancey, 2002, p. 190). It is imperative, therefore, to ask what factors students and (secondarily) tutors appeal to in accounting for the

perceived "success" of writing tutorials. It is impossible to separate the notion of tutorial "success" from the enumeration of certain evaluative criteria. Whether formulated by the center itself, by tutors, by students, by course instructors and thesis directors, or by a combination of participants, these often tacit criteria are "running in the background" of every writing tutorial.

This study suggests a hybrid methodology combining ethnographic techniques and conversation analysis that may enable a more realistic means of evaluation of the effectiveness of writing tutorials.

2. Methodology

Stephen North, perhaps the original writing center theorist, proposed a method-ology for assessing writing tutorials and writing centers, the analysis of tutorial talk:

> Talk is everything. If the writing center is ever to prove its worth in other than quantitative terms — number of students seen, for example, or hours of tutorials provided — it will have to do so by describing its talk: what characterizes it, what effects it has, how it can be enhanced. (1984, p. 444)

The methodology used in this study fits North's recommendation, and falls into the "naturalistic" category:

> The naturalistic element means that the evaluator seeks first-hand experience of the situation, studying it in situ without redefining, constraining, or manipulating it. The participant element means that all stakeholders or their representatives are usually involved in the evaluation. Evaluators acknowledge multiple realities and seek, by inductive reasoning, to understand the various perspectives, and, at the same time, evolve an appropriate methodology. (Bell, 2000, p. 13)

Note the connection between this approach to the assessment of writing centers and Hamp-Lyons' (2001) urging that we include all stakeholders in the assessment of writing. In order to accommodate these multiple perspectives, *interactional sociolinguistics* (Schiffrin, 1996) was selected as the primary research approach. Based on the work of Gumperz (1982), interactional sociolinguistics combines conversation-analytic and ethnographic techniques, thus permitting the concurrent analysis of linguistic and contextual factors.

2.1. Research questions

Three research questions guided this qualitative, interpretive study:

1. What linguistic and interactional features appear in conversations in these tutorials?
2. Which of these linguistic and interactional features do tutors and tutees reference when commenting on the success of the tutorials, and is the

recurrence of any of these features correlated with assessments of a tutorial as "successful"?

3. What conclusions can be reached linking analysis of the tutorials with reflections upon the tutorials as regards perceived success of the tutorial and its impact on writing improvement?

Out of these questions arose the research methodology: Question (1) was answered by analysis of features and sequences of talk in tutorial transcripts, while question (2) was answered by analysis of data gathered in participant interviews. Question (3) associated the two data sets to provide an account of tutorial success and associate this with writing success.

2.2. Setting

The research site was Indiana University Writing Tutorial Services (WTS), which serves students in freshman and basic English composition classes and also graduate and undergraduate students, both native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English, in the full range of academic disciplines, at four campus sites.

2.3. Participants

Participants in the study were six NS and six Asian NNS undergraduate students enrolled at the university during the spring and summer terms of 1997, along with their respective tutors (Table 1).

This selection of tutorials yielded a wider selection of interactions between males and females, and NSs and NNSs of English; between tutorials in which tutors' subject-area expertise matched and differed from the content area of tutees' papers; between discipline-specific tutorials, and those with freshman composition students; and between first-time visits to WTS and repeat visits with the same tutor. In qualitative terms, this data set is an attempt to illustrate the varied contexts in which tutorial conversations occurred in this writing center.

2.4. Procedure

The participation of students and tutors in the study was solicited before their scheduled tutorials. The tutorials were then taped and transcribed (see Appendix A for transcription conventions). The student assignment sheet and paper, and the tutor's record of the tutorial were obtained as supporting documentation. Within a few days of each tutorial, the student and tutor met with the researcher separately to discuss their interaction. A second meeting with the researcher, usually a week later, was a "member check" during which participants read through the researcher's notes of the first interview, clarifying and correcting information. Participants then elaborated upon aspects of the notes and of the tutorial transcript. Finally, the researcher asked both participants in each tutorial to identify tutor behaviors they

Table 1
Participant information

Tutorial	Total time (minute)	Tutor gender and age	Tutee gender, language proficiency, and age	Tutor area of primary expertise	Tutee paper content area	First-time visit	Repeat visit w/same tutor
A	53	M (36)	NSF (29)	English (literature)	Political Science	no	yes
B	59	F (28)	NSM (22)	English (literature)	Math	no	yes
C	59	F (50)	NSF (19)	Education	English (composition)	no	yes
D	57	F (37)	NNSM (20)	English (literature)	English (composition)	no	no
E	59	F (32)	NNSF (20)	English (literature)	English (composition)	no	yes
F	53	M (32)	NSF (20)	Philosophy	Sociology	no	yes
G	50	F (26)	NSF (19)	English (composition)	Folklore	yes	no
H	57	F (34)	NNSF (22)	English (literature)	English (literature)	no	yes
I	55	F (22)	NNSF (21)	Sociology	Religious Studies	no	yes
J	38	F (26)	NNSM (27)	Comparative Literature	English (composition)	yes	no
K	50	M (28)	NNSF (25)	English (literature)	English (composition)	yes	no
L	53	F (25)	NSF (18)	English (literature)	English (composition)	yes	no

believed were most explicitly linked to tutorial success, and later, tutor and tutee interpretations of these details were compared.

3. Features for analysis

The features selected for the analysis of tutorial transcripts were discourse phases; interactional features, specifically volubility (time at talk); overlaps (simultaneous speech and interruptions); backchannels; laughter; directive type and frequency; mitigation type and frequency; and the negotiation of acceptances and rejections of evaluations and directives. In the oral discourse analysis literature, these features have been argued to depict such interactive stances as role, dominance, and expertise (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1991; Lim & Bowers, 1991; Tyler, 1995) and have been employed in analyses of tutorial talk by Blau, Hall, and Strauss (1998), Davis Hayward, Hunter, and Wallace (1988), Seckendorf (1987), Thonus (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2001), and Young (1992). An even more important motivation for choosing these features is that study participants referenced these and similar features in construing tutorials as "successful." The features are briefly described below.

3.1. Discourse phases

An outline of a tutorial's phases and component segments, its profile, was compiled for each of the 12 tutorials. The purposes of the profile were to "map" the interaction and to track topic nominations, which are key to understanding role and power relations in one-on-one conversations in educational settings (Rudolph, 1994; Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989; Walker & Elias, 1987). Following Agar (1985) and Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992), the key phases identified were (1) the *opening*, (2) the *diagnosis*, (3) the *directive*, and (4) the *closing*.

3.2. Volubility

Volubility or participant time at talk (James & Drakich, 1993; Tannen, 1994) in the tutorials was measured by four different methods: total words, words per minute, words per turn, and ratio of tutor to student words.

3.3. Overlaps

In this analysis, *overlap* was defined as any simultaneous speech in which a conversational participant takes the floor before the first speaker has relinquished it through "completion intonation" (Jefferson, 1986). Based on the typology proposed by Roger, Bull, and Smith (1988), three kinds of overlap were identified. The first is the initiation of a contribution by a second party before the first has finished:

(TG - Tutor G, SG - Student G)

TG: Why no-, I mean why, **[why**

⇒ SG: **[It doesn't work that way?** I mean, I, I always, that's just the way I
always (.) **[thought**

⇒ TG: **[Where would you put it in,** in this paper **[if you wanted to move it?**

⇒ SG: **[Well, I mean it would be the body paragraph** in the
middle, like I was going to end up talking about these (.) kind of like, because that's what I was, I thought
we were supposed to do...

(Tutorial G, 98-100)

A second type of overlap, the *joint production* (Ferrara, 1994; Sacks, 1992) constitutes the completion of a first party's utterance by the second:

(TH - Tutor H, SH - Student H)

TH: So those yeah, that's the way, that's definitely a good way to go about it, um to identify the key concepts
that you want to include in your thesis that are really important to your argument. ((writing)) So the
personal and cultural memory (5s), the Kundera expressing his state of mind,   (4s)

SH: uh-huh

TH: and then Silko

⇒ SH: **Speaks for her heritage?**

TH: Speaks for her heritage? (4s) Yeah. So all of this into your thesis...

(Tutorial H, 19-20)

A third and less frequent type of overlap in these data is *simultaneous speech*, a main-channel overlap without taking the floor.

3.4. Backchannels

Backchannels were defined as "off-line" hearer continuers not constituting a taking of the floor (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Because of their low volume and pitch, backchannels in these tutorial data differ noticeably from the higher volume and often higher pitch of *listener responses* (Fiksdal, 1990), which are main-channel utterances that fill turn slots. Both backchannels (*o.k.*, *uh-huh*) and a listener response (*Got it*) are illustrated here:

(TA - Tutor A, SA - Student A)

SA: What brings me in? I'm working on a paper for my class, Ethics and Public Policy,
and I've come up with a draft, and I'm looking for feedback on the draft.

⇒ TA: **o.k.**

SA: Basically, the (.) intention of the course is to develop good arguments

TA: **uh-huh**

SA: and we're studying ethics and public policy, and this week we were [on (.) the subject of

TA: **[o.k.**

SA: surrogacy, surrogate parenting.

⇒ TA: **Got it.**

(Tutorial A, 1-2)

Note, however, that [listener response] is not analyzed in this paper.

3.5. Laughter

Laughter has been characterized as a "conversational activity" (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987) and intentional speech act (Mao, 1997). It fills turn slots, serves as a response to previous talk, and acts as a purposeful lead-in to the next talk sequence. In addition, "laughing together is a valued occurrence which can be the product of methodic, coordinated activities" (Jefferson, 1984, p. 348). In these data, three types of laughter were identified: single-party, sequenced, and simultaneous.

3.6. Directive type and frequency

Directives offer what Fitch (1994) described as a clear "window" into participants' perceptions of role and status. This analysis recognized two types of directives, *interaction-internal directives* (IIDs) (West, 1990) and *suggestions* (D'Andrade & Wish, 1985; Searle, 1975). IIDs deal with the "here and now" of tutorial interaction, the work that will be accomplished during the tutorial by tutor or by student, e.g., *Say a little bit more about that. Maybe you could flesh that out*. In contrast, *suggestions* refer to actions the tutor wishes the tutee to perform once the tutorial is over, e.g., *But work on it a little bit, and run it by him* [the course instructor]. Directives were typed and graded according to a system of "request strategies" (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Combined with mitigation, these produced a ten-point scale from mitigated indirect (less direct) to unmitigated imperative (more direct) directives, as exemplified in Table 2.

3.7. Mitigation type and frequency

In the analysis of mitigation type and frequency, a "mitigated" utterance was one with one or more downgraders attached to it. These included tense/aspect and conditional/subjunctive syntactic downgraders and six lexical-phrasal downgraders: appealer, cajoler, hedge, downtoner, subjectivizer, and understater (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Moreover, upgraders such as *really*, *definitely*, and *again*, which aggravate rather than mitigate utterances, were noted (see Table 3).

3.8. Negotiation of acceptances and rejections of evaluations and directives

Gathered during participant interviews, this information amplified the utterance-level analysis of directives to focus on outcomes in sequences over multiple turns. Of interest were (a) how often and in what ways tutor and student evaluations and directives were received, and (b) what impact negotiations of acceptances and rejections had on the perceived success of each tutorial.

Table 2
Directive strategies

1. Indirect (mitigated):
Maybe the thesis doesn't have to say everything changed one way or the other. (Tutorial F, 195)
2. Indirect (unmitigated):
And when you're unsure about idioms that's a good place to look. (Tutorial H, 80)
3. Interrogative (M):
Is there like some general way you could just say what, what does that, this essay describes? (Tutorial E, 101)
4. Interrogative (U):
And then are you going to have examples (.) of how this script works? (Tutorial B, 25)
5. First person modal (M):
Um (.) if you decide to use this quote, I would suggest that you lop it off. (Tutorial C, 48)
6. First person modal (U):
So I would go with that as well. (Tutorial J, 90)
7. Second person modal (M):
I was just wondering if maybe you just want to make this um a statement rather than a question, just so you can be a little more directive with um (.) your gentle reader. (Tutorial A, 81)
8. Second person modal (U):
You need to talk about the intro before you get into the, into the thesis. (Tutorial D, 35)
9. Imperative (M):
So, and then, you know, in some way just to sort of like remind us. (Tutorial G, 30)
10. Imperative (U):
So think about that when you're writing your introduction. (Tutorial L, 157)

Table 3
Mitigation strategies

1. Tense/aspect:
I'm wondering *if you want to um, if you want to sort of bonk the reader on the head with that sooner*. (Tutorial A, 34)
2. Conditional/subjunctive:
So, ***if you were to look up the prepositions***, *you would get good examples of how these prepositions would be used in a sentence*. (Tutorial J, 64)
3. Appealer:
Then you're going to talk about these three guys who wrote these articles, ***right?*** (Tutorial L, 149)
4. Cajoler:
You know, *you should number your pages*. (Tutorial B, 34)
5. Hedge:
So you can ***kind of*** *im-, apply that strategy to your other paragraphs, too, then*. (Tutorial G, 82)
6. Downtoner:
So you ***probably*** *want to use these phrases in your topic sentences*. (Tutorial H, 49)
7. Subjectivizer:
But you need to show why you're agreeing with them, ***it seems to me***. (Tutorial K, 55)
8. Understater:
And you can show, and you're going to split this paragraph up ***a little bit*** *more to show how he's willing*. (Tutorial D, 103)
9. (Upgrader):
Again, *you want to, what you want to ask yourself in deciding this is "What is the point that I'm trying to get across, and what, what order would make more sense?"* (Tutorial I, 81)

4. Results

It should first be noted that participants' interpretations of conversational features and events in their tutorials often corresponded, and that this coincided with positive tutor and student evaluations of those tutorials as "successful." Specifically, Tutorials A, G, and J were judged by both participants as "successful," and Tutorials C and I by both participants as "unsuccessful," with the others "moderately successful." Specific indicators of why these judgments arose will be uncovered by the description and discussion of results that follows.

4.1. Discourse phases

Tutorial *openings* were very short (1–2 turns) and at times missing (as in Tutorial C, Table 4). This marks tutorial conversations as solidly institutional: It is the *tutor's* job to "get down to business." The *diagnosis* phase tended to be fairly short and usually occurred only once during the tutorial. The *directive* phase occupied the majority of turns in all of the tutorials. The *closing* was rarely absent but highly variable in length, depending on how much small talk tutor and tutee engaged in. Tutors nominated the lion's share of topics, thus controlling tutorial interaction to a great extent. In Table 4, note that Student C nominated only one topic during the directive phase and one in the closing.

Table 4
Profile of Tutorial C

Opening (none)
 Diagnosis (1–21)
  T ⇒ Segment 1: Inviting S self-diagnosis (1–6)
  T ⇒ Segment 2: Discussing the assignment sheet (6–21)

 Directive (21–97)
  T ⇒ Segment 1: Cutting out quotations (21–28)
  T ⇒ Segment 2: Mechanics: word choice and spelling (28–32)
  T ⇒ Segment 3: Cutting out quotations (32–39)
  T ⇒ Segment 4: Word choice in paraphrases (39–47)
  T ⇒ Segment 5: Cutting out quotations through paraphrasing (47–63)
  T ⇒ Segment 6: Clarifying meaning (63–66)
  T ⇒ Segment 7: Mechanics: verb tense (66–72)
  T ⇒ Segment 8: Cutting out quotations (72–87)
  T ⇒ Segment 9: Mechanics: agreement (87–91)
  T ⇒ Segment 10: Cutting out quotations (91–92)
  T ⇒ Segment 11: MLA citation form (93)
  S ⇒ Segment 12: Composing a title (94–97)

 Closing (97–110)
  T ⇒ Segment 1: Small talk and praise (97–103)
  T ⇒ Segment 2: Leave-taking (103–105)
  T ⇒ Segment 3: Filling in the evaluation form (106–109)
  S ⇒ Segment 4: Comic postlude (109–110)

Characterization of discourse phases by participants fell into three categories: *interactional*, *rhetorical*, and (for lack of a better term) *parts of the paper*. Chosen by the majority of participants, interactional descriptions of discourse phases focused either on tutor actions, student actions, or both. Rhetorical characterizations were produced only by tutors, such as Tutor K's "return to thesis statement" and "organizing paragraphs around ideas." Parts-of-the-paper descriptions included Student D's "thesis, body, intro, and conclusion" and Tutor B's "appendix, body, intro, and conclusion." In six of the nine tutorials for which both participants offered descriptions of discourse phases, tutor and student characterizations were similar (Tutorials A, C, E, F, G, and K). Despite this overall similarity, the language used by tutors and students to characterize identical phases often diverged. Differing interpretations were also evident in tutors' and students' perceptions of actions in the tutorials. For example, Student C (Tutorial C) described two of the phases of Tutorial C as "when I first came in and told her what I wanted" (student action), while Tutor C (Tutorial C) described this as "her input and what she thought" (tutor action).

4.2. Interactional features

Few tutorials evidenced identical participant interpretations of these and other interactional features. In fact, divergent interpretations of these features occurred in even the most "successful" tutorials, though more frequently in tutorials producing the least mutual satisfaction.

4.2.1. Volubility

In all but one tutorial, tutors spoke half again as much as their tutees (a ratio of 1.5). Tutors were considerably more voluble with NNS tutees than with NS tutees.

4.2.2. Overlaps

Overlaps were not solely a phenomenon of tutor speech. Tutees were also given to overlaps, overall at a slightly higher rate than their tutors (0.26 vs. 0.23 per turn) and sometimes at an individually higher rate than their tutors, especially in NS–NS tutorials. According to Makri-Tsilipakou (1994), *affiliative* or addressee-oriented, face-saving overlaps, particularly joint productions, display cooperation and empathy between interlocutors. The majority of the overlaps in these data were interpreted by the participants as affiliative. Tutees commented that they found their tutors' overlaps "helpful," and tutors interpreted tutee overlaps as movements towards greater student authority and participation. However, there were also some *disaffiliative* overlaps, that is, overlaps bearing little or no relation to the previous speaker's utterance: Makri-Tsilipakou (1994) says that these have the best chance of being interpreted as interruptions. Following is an example of an overlap identified as an interruption, from Tutorial K:

(TK - Tutor K, SK - Student K)

TK: O.K. (.) O.K. So, how can I help you?   What do you want to work on with this?
SK: Because um my problem is my because sometimes I lack um, I, I have my first um summary, because
        sometimes I lack um some words. And I because the different languages, so I tend to transfer, [translated
TK: [uh-huh
SK: that word.   So I want yeah, I don't know if you can see some problems **[Um my writing skill**
⇒ TK: o.k.   **[When you talk about (.)**
        I'm sorry, O.K. When you talk about, when you talk about translating, do you write in, what is your first
        language?
SK: Um Chinese.

(Tutorial K, 19-21)

Whereas both Student K and Tutor K interpreted his overlap (*When you talk about . . .*) as an interruption, Tutor K viewed his own action with disapproval, but Student K interpreted it as signaling his interest, consistent with her NNS positive politeness culture, which views apparently face-threatening acts by role superiors more positively than in Western cultures.

4.2.3. Backchannels
With three exceptions, students backchanneled more often than their tutors (an average of 1.17 vs. 0. 74 per turn). NNS students (especially Student H and Student K) backchanneled far more frequently than their NS peers.

4.2.4. Laughter
Laughter was not a common feature of conversational turns in these writing tutorials (0.14 per turn for tutors vs. 0.25 for students). Not only did tutors in two NNS tutorials (I and K) not laugh, but the mean rates for both tutors and students were considerably lower than those for participants in NS tutorials.

4.3. Directive type and frequency

Tutor directives were frequent in all these tutorials. The typical pattern was an adjacency pair of one speaker's proposal (evaluation or suggestion) followed by acceptance or rejection of that proposal by the other participant. Evaluation–suggestion sequences were frequently expanded by a third element, the grounder (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), which strengthens directives by "promising" the outcome students might expect if they take the tutor's recommended course of action. As the parentheses in the formula below imply, the only obligatory element of an evaluation–suggestion sequence in these tutorials was the suggestion; the other elements were optional.

- (Evaluation) (Acceptance or rejection of the evaluation)
- Suggestion (+ grounder)
- (Acceptance or rejection of the suggestion)

Overall, the most common directive strategy employed in these tutorials was the second-person (2p) modal formula (e.g., in Tutorial B "You should number

your pages"). Of 784 directives, nearly 40% were phrased in this way, compared to just over 30% for the next most frequent category, imperatives. This attests to the fact that most tutor suggestions were formulated with a modicum of politeness and attention to potential face threat (see also Thonus, 1999a). However, imperatives were more common in NNS tutorials. The overall frequency of tutor directives in tutorials with NS and NNS students was remarkably similar, although the tutorials with the highest directive frequency (Tutorial H) and the lowest (Tutorial E) were both NNS tutorials.

In their interviews, tutors repeatedly used the adjective *directive* as they characterized and criticized their own interactional contributions. Their use of this adjective referred not only to uttering directives frequently but also to "repeatedly providing too much assistance to students" rather than asking "Socratic questions."

Tutor comments regarding their directiveness and its outcomes fell into three categories: (a) avoiding the "teacherly voice"; (b) being too directive; (c) and warranting directiveness through the offering of *accounts* ("culturally acceptable justification for what is considered to be unacceptable behavior," Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 27). Tutor A, who led one of the "successful" tutorials, reported that he avoided directiveness by adopting "a voice that makes the tutee feel somewhat more comfortable than if I were using a sort of teacherly voice." He labeled as "Grundyesque" a more directive tutoring approach forced as a response to students who expected their tutors to ask all the questions. In contrast, in one of the least successful tutorials, Tutor C labeled her utterances in one excerpt "dictatorial" and "teacher-ish," a tone she claimed to have gained through years of holding teacher–student conferences.

Of the 12 tutors, Tutor F provided the most extensive critique of his own "directiveness." He felt that doing "more constructive work than Socratic work" was a decision harmful to the student: "The authority you have as an instructor — when you say that, it's as good as said. Someone's going to walk away thinking, 'The instructor or tutor responded to that. I'm on to something.' You want them to be on to it because of their winnowing out the wheat from the chaff. You don't want them to be on it because you said, 'I like it.'"

Other tutors besides Tutor F described themselves as "directive" but went on to offer accounts for their behavior. Certain similarities emerge in these accounts: Suggestions were offered, for example, for the student's own good, so that skills would transfer to other tutorials. Other accounts for directiveness included Tutor B's reference to "time running out" and Tutor J's explanation that the tutorial was "more advice-filled than the norm" because of Student J's lack of familiarity with WTS and with her as a tutor.

During the second interview of each participant pair, tutors and students were asked to rank a set of tutor directives along a continuum of forcefulness. In only one of the 12 tutorials was tutor and student ranking of directives identical (Tutorial G), and in only one did both participants opt out of the exercise (Tutorial C). As was the case for interactional features, similar or identical rankings of directives

were evident in tutorials considered the most "successful" (A, G, and J), whereas divergent ranking was a necessary but not sufficient condition for lack of mutual satisfaction.

4.4. Mitigation type and frequency

On average, half of the directives tutors issued were mitigated. However, more mitigated than unmitigated directives were uttered in NS tutorials than in NNS tutorials, a full 10-percentage-point difference (52% vs. 42%). Tutors were more likely to use multiple mitigated directives in tutorials with NS students, and much more likely to use downgraders in NS tutorials than in NNS tutorials.

4.5. Negotiation of acceptances and rejections of tutor evaluations and suggestions

Evaluation–suggestion sequences were analyzed for evidence of tutor–student negotiation. The following example of an evaluation–suggestion sequence is from Tutorial D:

Tutor evaluation (negative): It's not quite the one you made it in there.
Student acceptance (backchannel): *yeah.*
Student self-evaluation (negative): *The explanation is not really direct.*
Tutor acceptance (listener response): *Yeah.*
Tutor suggestion: But basically try to relate more directly to the quotation.
Tutor grounder: And that'll be kind of neat because it explains about . . .
Student acceptance (listener response): *Yeah, but I'm just a bit confused.*

Although tutor–student negotiations of evaluations and directives seemed to indicate asymmetry, such negotiations were more likely to lead to mutual satisfaction.

4.6. Some general findings

Despite the institutional discourse context that places discernible constraints upon the participants, the wide range of tutor and student conversational behavior evidenced in these interactions cannot be directly linked to a single contextual variable. Rather, tutorial success appears to be contingent on a network of factors.

Not surprisingly, symmetry of tutor and tutee perceptions correlates with judgment of the tutorial as "successful." Manifest lack of symmetry indicates conversational "difficulty" (Obeng, 1994) and produces a lack of mutual satisfaction with the tutorial session, whereas relative symmetry in tutor and student talk may indicate parallel orientations to the conversation and predict tutorial success. Of the 12 tutorials, certain interactions emerged as more symmetrical than others in terms of the linguistic and interactional features examined. For example, student involvement in the introduction of topics seen in Tutorials J and K contrasted with tutor dominance of topic initiation and the monotopicality and topic recursiveness

of Tutorials C and F. Tutorial G, with its high frequency of both tutor and student laughter and small talk, and Tutorial A, with its high frequency of comic interludes, joint productions, and small talk, may attest to a common orientation on the part of tutor and student: "We can do this together, and this can be fun."

Though symmetrical, lower than average tutor and student rates of volubility, overlap, backchannels, and laughter, and specifically low rates or absence of backchannels and laughter (Tutorial I) may indicate low involvement and investment of both participants in the interaction, and this low involvement seemed to correlate with less mutual satisfaction with the interaction. Mismatches in volubility (Tutorials D, E, and K), overlaps (Tutorials B and E), backchannels (Tutorials H, K, and L), and laughter (Tutorials B and H) may signal differing perceptions of conversational roles and expectations of the other party.

Remarkably, personal familiarity of tutor with tutee seemed to offer no guarantee of mutual satisfaction. Of the most successful tutorials (A, G, and J), G and J were first-time tutorials, whereas A was a repeat visit for Student A with the same tutor (Tutor A). At the other end of the continuum, in Tutorials C and I, Student C and Student I had previously worked with their respective tutors, thus suggesting that rather than increasing the likelihood of a positive outcome, familiarity created certain participant expectations that were not fulfilled. A striking similarity among Tutorials A, G, and J is that none qualified as subject-area matches, an attribute they shared with the least successful tutorials (C and I). In addition to familiarity and subject-area match, gender, age, student language proficiency, and tutor subject-area expertise were ineffective predictors of either tutorial success or inadequacy.

4.7. Identifying the attributes of "successful" tutorials

During the second participant interview, tutors and tutees were asked to list the tutor behaviors they viewed as most contributing to the success of the tutorials. This activity was based on the assumption that mutual satisfaction indicates success, and that satisfaction is at least partly motivated by equivalent and positive interpretations of reciprocally nominated tutor and student behaviors. Successful tutor behaviors most often cited by both tutors and tutees were (a) helping with the definition and the construction of a thesis statement (Tutorials A, F, H, K, and L); (b) clarifying and expanding essay content around it (B, D, F, H, J, and K); (c) emphasizing student ownership of the paper (A, D, E, and G); and (d) encouraging further contact between the tutee and the course instructor (F, K). To illustrate, Tutor A and Student A agreed that Tutor A had "reassured" his tutee and placed responsibility for its success squarely on her shoulders. Student A specifically recalled Tutor A's technique of "paraphrasing her," and both tutor and tutee remembered Tutor A's focus on key words and his questioning of Student A's main ideas. In contrast to the relative symmetry of participant perceptions in Tutorial A, those in Tutorial C were highly asymmetrical. In fact, what Student C found most helpful about the tutorial was not even mentioned by Tutor C, and vice-versa. While Tutor C congratulated herself on helping Student C with appropriate use of

quotations and on praising her while warning of possible stumbling blocks, Student C rejected both tutor actions as "not helpful." In fact, the only tutorial advice she said she liked was Tutor C's "correcting and clarifying sentences," an action Tutor C did not view as "real tutoring."

The hybrid methodology of this study, combining conversation analysis (linguistic analysis of tutorial transcripts) and naturalistic enquiry (interviews with participants) revealed some necessary but not sufficient conditions for the success of tutorials in this context. Ten attributes will be discussed. While all have emerged from the analysis the data, the first four came principally from the interview data and the remaining six came principally from the tutorial data.

(1) *The tutor is a student, actively engaged in academic writing in his or her discipline*. In interviews, students identified their tutors' current writing experience as part of "knowing writing." For example, Student A said of her tutor, "He's in the college atmosphere, and I think he understands what is expected in the college atmosphere, especially in the writing process." The two tutorials judged least successful by participants were those with "adjunct" or non-student tutors, Tutor C and Tutor I, who were not concurrently enrolled in university classes.

(2) *The instructor "surrogate" role is declined by the tutor, and this abdication is welcomed by the student.* The student views the tutor's role as distinct and less authoritative than that of his or her course instructor and realizes that tutorial conversations differ from other instructional conversations. Discussion of this issue arose most frequently in interviews with participants in Tutorials A, G, and J, those judged "most successful" according to a number of other criteria. For example, Tutor A explained that he did not view himself as a "surrogate" for the instructor: "I represent a reader . . . I'm certainly not in the position of speaking as the final reader, but I think I can make some educated guesses about things I probably have in common with that reader." Student A reasoned that the differences between her tutors and her instructor created "a comfort zone" in tutorials. The relaxed atmosphere was "not unprofessional, but it's less professional [than talking to a professor], more on a friendship basis." Avoiding the instructor role was more difficult for tutors who had taught or were currently teaching the same courses in which their tutees were enrolled (Tutor D, Tutor E, Tutor K, and Tutor L).

(3) *Tutor authority and expertise are not openly negotiated.* In what may appear a direct challenge to the abdication of instructor surrogacy, Tutor D believed her student had constructed her as "a type of teacher, which means that there's a greater respect and you don't want to interact as much." In his interview, Student D supported her: "If tutors are in WTS already, I think they're qualified to guide us in our papers, or else they wouldn't be there." In contrast, this excerpt from Tutorial C, one of the least successful tutorials, illustrates open negotiation of Tutor C's expertise. Note Student C's ironic utterance *I'm not the expert*:

(TC - Tutor C, SC - Student C)

TC: Um so (.) how you, how do you want to handle that, as far as the quotation? (.) Since I, since I heard you
        say, and I'm trying to restate it, but I thought I heard you say that you thought that this quote, this first
        quote (.) is not precisely what, what you wanted to say (.)
SC: **No, that's not what I said ((laugh)).**
TC: Then I didn't hear you correctly. Go ahead.
SC: I just, I, I don't think there's a problem with the quote.   Like, that's just
TC: o.k.
SC: what I think.   But you know, **I'm not the expert**, so. I du-, I just guess I just
TC: o.k.
SC: don't think that I understand why you think that there's a serious problem there.

(Tutorial C, 55-57)

(4) *The tutor's diagnoses and the student's self-diagnoses correspond and are
    agreed upon early in the session*. Tutorial I, judged one of the least suc-
    cessful, was instructive in this regard. Because it was a repeat tutorial, and
    because Student I returned with a draft on a different subject than she and
    Tutor I had worked on during their previous session, Tutor I reported being
    caught off guard. Because Student I did not agree with Tutor I's concept of
    the audience for her paper, she did not accept her tutor's diagnoses. This
    created havoc in the tutorial. Tutor I said: "I had a tough time because she
    wrote this draft for a reader who knows Muslim terminology, and that made
    it difficult for me to make meaning as I read. Because my familiarity with
    the text was none, absolutely none, I couldn't get my head inside what she
    was possibly thinking." Student I argued: "You don't really need to explain
    everything . . . the language or terminology of it. Like if you say *sheikh*, you
    don't have to say 'Sheikh is a learned person.' You just basically assume
    that your reader knows it . . . I kept telling her that when I'm writing this
    paper the paper is for an audience of this class who has read the book, and
    they know what I'm talking about."

(5) *Turn structure more closely resembles that of "real" conversation rather
    than an ask-and-advise service encounter comprised of restricted question
    + answer adjacency pairs*. This contrast is illustrated with the two exam-
    ples which show the turn structure, Tutorial E, which was rated highly,
    and Tutorial F, which was rated less favorably. Tutorial E was replete with
    "real" questions for student information or opinion that TE did not already
    know or suspect:

        In contrast to Tutorial E, Tutorial F may be characterized as a series of
    question–answer adjacency pairs with only minimal elaboration.

(6) *Average to high rates of interactional features (volubility, overlaps, backchan-
    nels, laughter) signal involvement of both parties. Overlaps and backchan-
    nels are welcomed if they serve affiliative purposes*. Tutorials in which
    both tutor and student demonstrated high and roughly equal rates of inter-
    actional features were rated as among the most successful. For example,
    in such tutorials both tutors and tutees commented that they found their

(TE - Tutor E, SE - Student E)

TE: And is that author (.) um **do you know like where the author's from? [Is this, do you**
SE: 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[Hmm
TE: **get any information [in there, in the article?** I mean, not maybe specifically what
SE: 　　　　　　　　[No ((laugh)).\
TE: country, but **is this author from inside the** 　　　　**Muslim world? [Did you find**
SE: 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　no　　　　　　　　[No.
TE: **that out?**
SE: Just talk about the right and Muslim 　　　　　(2s) [No. (4s)
TE: 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　uh-huh 　[o.k.
Because I was just wondering whether (.) you know you were saying outsiders view the veil as oppressive,
[but
SE: [Oh, you think the author may be an outsider?
TE: Well then, yeah, that was, that was my question, of if, not that I, I think the author is an outsider but
wondering **where you would place the author as inside or outside?**

(Tutorial E, 49-51)

(TF - Tutor F, SF - Student F)

TF: **How would it, I mean, do they have like no economy at all? (.)**
SF: Mmm, not really. [I mean
TF: 　　　　　　　　　[**What, I guess we need to define "economy" then**
SF: Hold on. Uh-huh.
TF: Yeah. Well what does it, what do you mean by when you say, "The economy helps **you understand social
structures"? What's going on there?**
SF: Um (.) they're not working in the job force. I mean, they're not [um there's no job
TF: 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[o.k.
SF: force…

(Tutorial F, 47-49)

interlocutor's overlaps "helpful." Student F commented of her tutor's over-
laps, "He's incorporating what I'm saying," and Student D said of his tutor,
"She's finishing my thought." In such tutorials, tutors also interpreted stu-
dent overlaps as moves towards greater authority and participation. For
example, Tutor H explained her student's overlaps as "She's just trying to
restate what she means."

(7) *The international features of the tutorial are markedly characterized by
movements toward solidarity, including such features as simultaneous laugh-
ter, affiliative overlaps, and small talk.* Looking only at the first point on
this list, both tutors and students viewed simultaneous laughter as positive.
Here, Tutor A and Student A laughed simultaneously about "a third person
saying this, or asking these questions" (Why? So what?):

(TA - Tutor A, SA - Student A)

TA: ((laugh)) That's [good! I like that!
SA: 　　　　　　　　[((laugh)) 　Someone else was here, I know who was it, or give me some hint or of like,
--?-- "Do I need to go on or what?" She said, "Well answer these two questions: 'Why? So what?'"
TA: **[((laugh))**
SA: **[((laugh))**
TA: **So what? Who cares? Why am I here?**

(Tutorial A, 59-60)

According to Student A, their simultaneous laughter was yet another indication of "the circle" of their communication in the tutorial: "We were both laughing because we know the context and where those questions come from, and we just think it's funny." Tutor A's utterances *So what? Who cares? Why am I here?* extended the laughter, he reported, "making sport, having a little existential crisis, making a joke." Both participants interpreted laughter as a move towards "peerness."

(8) *Negotiation of acceptances and rejections of tutor evaluations and directives most often results in student acceptances. Acceptances are overt and clearly marked, and rejections, if in evidence, are supported by accounts.* With the exception of those in Tutorial C, outright student rejections are rare in these data. NNS tutees were especially likely to mask their rejections. For example, here Tutor J suggests that Student J compose by talking into a tape recorder:

(TJ - Tutor J, SJ - Student J)

TJ: So if you're having trouble writing it down, one thing that you can do is, is take a step back from the words that you've chosen before and talk to yourself. Say, "O.K. This doesn't make sense. What can I say (.) differently? How can I express this story differently?" Um you might try opening up a new screen on your computer and [trying again without looking at the old words. Or you could try talking into a tape recorder.
SJ: [uh-huh
TJ: [I know that that feels silly, but you could play it back then and hear the story being told. (2s) O.K.?
SJ: oh [((**laugh**)) o.k.
      O.K., I will try. (.) Yeah, I will try. [((**laugh**))
TJ: [o.k.
      (2s) Good...

(Tutorial J, 59-60)

Student J construed his first laugh as an attempt to "soften" Tutor J's suggestion and his second laugh as a falsehood: "I'm not going to try."

(9) *Tutor mitigation of directives is frequent (for NS tutorials).* As mentioned above, more mitigated than unmitigated directives were uttered in NS tutorials than in NNS tutorials, and the least number of downgraders appearing in any NS tutorial was greater than the largest number in any NNS tutorial. These findings support Young's (1992) argument that NS and NNS tutees operate within different politeness cultures and Thonus' claim that suggestions "without such polite accoutrements" as mitigations are more comprehensible and thus more desired by NNS tutees (Thonus, 1999a, 1999b, p. 271).

(10) *Symmetrical interpretations of discourse phases, directive forcefulness, and tutor and student behaviors contributing to success indicate that tutor and student have achieved some degree of intersubjectivity, the understanding of the other's intent.* Results suggest that symmetrical interpretations of discourse phases and directive forcefulness were strongly linked by participants to perceptions of tutorial success, and that lack of symmetry was associated with less than enthusiastic evaluations of the interactions.

5. Conclusion

This investigation arose out of the expressed need for concrete evaluation of an ongoing academic support service. Thus, the research results were immediately and practically applicable to the achievement of the mission of the enterprise and, the findings deserve consideration for use in evaluating the effectiveness of other tutoring contexts. The study thus qualifies as a case of applied linguistics *in* education rather than applied linguistics *of* education (John Heritage, personal communication, October 12, 1995).

Writing tutors are constantly involved in tradeoffs between communicative and social goals, juggling comprehensibility, politeness, and effective practice (cf. Thonus, 1999b). Explicit statements by tutors and tutees regarding what contributed to tutorial success have indicated that the conventional perceptions of current tutorials as peer collaboration, while providing some guidelines for tutor behavior, also limit definitions of "successful" behaviors to certain prescribed actions (Thonus & Plummer, 1999) in ways that may not be helpful.

A focus on tutorial process is important and cannot be ignored, but given the current funding climate in higher education, a focus on tutorial outcomes is imperative. While this shift in emphasis from process to product may appear reversionary in terms of writing tutorial and composition theory, it also displays an interest in client (=student and instructor) expectations of a service, particularly one as institutionally accountable as a writing center. To contrast "good" and "bad" tutorials is essential, but to distinguish between "excellent" tutorials and "the rest" requires training tutors in specific interactional and pragmatic features that research of this type suggests are most conducive to success. And though no clear mechanism for doing so has yet been proposed, it is hoped that participant assessments of tutorial success will influence and result in positive instructor assessments of student writing.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A. Transcription conventions

Transcription style in the presentation of tutorial data is what Edwards (1993) terms *vertical*, a running arrangement of text in which utterance and nonutterance materials are presented as they occurred in real time. Additional symbols are drawn from Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) and He (1998).

Utterances are represented by conventional American English spellings for words and parts of words. Filled pauses (*um, hmm*) and listener responses (*Uh-huh, o.k., Huh?*) are represented and treated as words. Conventional punctuation (periods, commas, question marks) signals basic intonation contours, and exclamation points mark emphatic statements. Overlaps between participant contributions are symbolized by square brackets ([ ]) aligned vertically, as in this example:

```
TG:    Oh, so how all [of them relate to lecture, and not just how the leprechaun, [or just, just
       the
SG:                   [That's kind of what I was doing                           [Yeah,
TG:    [the leprechaun [relates.
SG:    [leprechaun.    [uh-huh
```

Joint productions and interruptions are sequenced spatially:

```
SG:    So that's why
TG:                   What's manifest function mean?
SG:    Manifest function
TG:                   I mean is this something that you explain in your paper?
```

Backchannels are inserted on the line just below that of the speaker who has the floor, as illustrated by SG's *o.k.* and *uh-huh* and TG's *yeah*:

```
TG:    O.K. um so let's see.  So what you're going to do then, let's just review here,    (.) is (.)
SG:                                                                               o.k.

TG:    add the collector's, I think that the main thing that you need to be doing is adding the collector's
       interpretation to [each of these paragraphs because
SG:                       [uh-huh
       I give the informant's,              pretty much.
TG:                             yeah
```

These symbols code nonutterance (nonlinguistic, paralinguistic) material:

(.)	Short pause (1–2 seconds)
(5s)	Timed pause (2+ seconds)
(( ))	Additional observation: laugh, cough, sigh, etc.
»	Hand striking or pounding a surface

These marks reflect analytical and display concerns:

- -?- -	Undecipherable or doubtful hearing
⇒	Turn(s) focused for analysis