



## **Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal**

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Yu Hang Kwan, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Corresponding email address: [kwanyh@connect.hku.hk](mailto:kwanyh@connect.hku.hk)

Publication date: September, 2022.

### **To cite this article**

Kwan, Y. H. (2022). What do Chinese learners of English want from a university writing centre? A Chinese tertiary student's views on writing centre peer tutoring. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 13(3), 389–394. <https://doi.org/10.37237/130306>

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## **What do Chinese Learners of English Want from a University Writing Centre? A Chinese Tertiary Student's Views on Writing Centre Peer Tutoring**

Yu Hang Kwan, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8537-7063>

### **Abstract**

Tutees are important people in university writing centres, yet their voices, especially what Chinese tutees think about peer writing tutoring, have tended to be largely overlooked in the writing centre scholarship. Adding to this under-researched area, this article reports on an interview with a Chinese tertiary learner of English who shared her views on writing centre peer tutoring. Through thematic content analysis, three core themes were identified: writing centre peer tutoring as an activity for the give-and-take of formative feedback on writing, the tutee's desire for professional directive guidance, and her perceived role of agenda-setting in ensuring tutoring quality. The implication for writing centre peer tutoring is that tutees may have their idiosyncratic preferences for tutoring strategies which may or may not align with the recommendations in writing centre handbooks and the general literature on teaching and learning. It is hoped that this article will stimulate future scholarly work on tutees' expectations and perspectives on peer writing tutoring, which can inform writing centre training and tutoring.

*Keywords:* EFL writers, peer-tutoring, student perceptions, tutorial success, writing centre

An increasing number of universities now offer English academic and professional writing support via the establishment of writing centres, creating an out-of-class avenue for students to book one-to-one consultations and discuss their writing with consultants. Some writing centres follow a peer tutoring model by hiring graduate and undergraduate students and training them as consultants (also called tutors in the writing centre literature). Following the call for more research on writing centre peer tutoring, this practice has attracted some attention in the literature, which has surveyed a range of topics including but not limited to interactional features of consultant-student talk in writing consultations, tutoring strategies and skills, and potential factors contributing to successful consultations, to name a few.

The scholarly work on writing centre peer tutoring, however, tended to overlook largely the voice of tutees, that is, students who visit writing centres to seek writing support. Tutees are important people in writing centre tutoring as the goal of writing centres is to

produce “better writers” (North, 1984, p. 438), and tutees’ voices, for instance, their perceptions of consultants’ roles, could shape the consultant-tutee interactions (Thonus, 2001). It is surprising that tutees’ voices were documented in only a few writing centre studies (see Moussu & David, 2015; Nakatake, 2019; Okuda, 2019; Thonus, 2001, 2002). Moussu and David’s (2015) work, for instance, found that English-as-a-second-language (ESL) tutees and native English-speaking tutees had different perceptions of the qualities of good tutors. One of such differences was that the former tended to agree more strongly that good tutors should focus on grammar and fix mistakes in tutees’ papers.

Although the limited research has identified areas that tutees needed assistance from writing centres and their perceptions of writing centre peer tutoring, this line of inquiry needs to be extended. A key limitation of these studies was that they surveyed writing centre tutees who were learners of English in American, Canadian, and Japanese universities. As university writing centres have been increasingly established in the Chinese context, understanding what Chinese tutees think about peer writing tutoring is vital (Chang, 2013; Tan, 2011). This article therefore adds to this under-researched area by reporting on an interview with a Chinese tertiary learner of English who shared her views on writing centre peer tutoring.

### **The Study**

The interview data reported below came from part of the author’s multiple-case study of peer tutoring at a writing centre in a leading research-intensive English-medium university in Hong Kong. At the time of the study, the writing centre served graduate and undergraduate government-funded students of the university, the majority of whom were learners of English from Hong Kong and Mainland China. With the approval from the university ethics committee and the writing centre directors, an interview was conducted with a writing centre tutee, who was a science-major undergraduate from Mainland China. She attended an individual consultation to go over her popular science article with a consultant involved in the author’s multiple-case study, and was invited to a post-consultation semi-structured interview by the researcher. In the interview, the tutee commented on the consultation and described her views on writing centre peer tutoring, including the purpose of writing consultations, consultant-tutee relationship, and the desirable qualities of consultants and consultations. The interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and studied closely through thematic content analysis. Through the back-and-forth reading of the interview transcript, three core

themes, along with their corresponding supporting ideas, emerged and were then situated in the discussions about writing tutoring (Miles et al., 2019). The main themes, which will be illustrated below, include the opportunity to receive formative feedback on drafts, the tutee's desire for professional directive guidance, and her perceived importance of agenda-setting.

### **The Tutee's Views on Writing Centre Peer Tutoring**

A key theme emerged in the interview was the tutee's perception of writing centre peer tutoring as an activity for the give-and-take of formative feedback on writing, which tended to be clientele's expectation of writing centre consultants (Williams, 2005). The tutee mentioned that an important purpose of writing consultations was to receive a reader's useful feedback particularly on the clarity of her writing, as she was aware that writers might be satisfied with their own work but their readers might not:

I think it um like like it's super important for us to have like others' (inaudible) opinions from others because when when you write a when you're writing the like your own essay and you feel like 'oh, quite good, everything was so nice' (inaudible) it's not the same from from the readers.

She valued suggestions for improvement, and was fine with consultants' criticisms rather than receiving a low grade for the final draft in the end. Meanwhile, the tutee regarded praise as 'not useful' and something that she was not expecting. Her preference for suggestions rather than praise could be reflected in this extract:

we want to like do some improvement or have some like really useful feedback from this consultation instead of like 'Oh, (inaudible) your essay is super good and (inaudible) nothing you should you should like work on it'.

Her non-appreciation of praise is contrary to the recommendations in the literature which see praise as a resource for affiliative relationship-building in pedagogical contexts including one-to-one writing conferences (see, for instance, Shvidko, 2021).

The tutee's desire to receive professional directive guidance was reflected in her expectations of the consultant-tutee relationship and good consultants, which was the second theme emerged in the interview. She preferred consultants to act like teachers who point out tutees' mistakes and give advice on them. This view, which was reiterated four times in the interview, aligns with the tendency that the writing centre clientele attributed an instructor-

like and advice-giver role to consultants (Thonus, 2001; Williams, 2005). The tutee also described two features of good consultants: be patient with tutees' work and be professional by showing familiarity with various text-types so that tutees could receive useful suggestions from consultants. Interestingly, she indicated her preference for native English speakers for their ability to give language-related 'professional advice':

because I'm not a native speaker, so that's gonna be a lot of problem with my language usage like things like that. So it'd be the best if the tutor is like a native speaker and he can give you like professional advice on the language part.

This perception was also identified in Okuda's (2019) study in which a case study tutee treated 'native speakers as language experts' (p. 19), and Moussu and David's (2015) survey which found that ESL writing centre clientele appreciated more grammar and editing support through a directive tutoring approach.

The final theme emerged in the interview was the role of agenda-setting in ensuring the quality of writing consultations. This view seemed to be related to the consultation the tutee attended, which she described as a 'failure' because of the divergence between her concern (the clarity of ideas in her popular science article) and the actual focus of the session (the use of sub-headings in the article). In the light of this mismatch, she suggested consultants checking with tutees on their intended consultation goals at the start of the session, as shown in this extract:

because if we want to like make for the the advice that we want to have, then we have to like make tutor understand what what we're looking for ... if um probably if like tutor can ask like can explain what he or she thinks that I want to have I want to like have from this consultation before the consultation start.

This process would 'make everyone on the right path' and, more importantly, tutees could receive advice that matches their concerns. The tutee's suggestion coincides with the recommendation given in writing centre handbooks (Bruce, 2009; Macauley Jr., 2005) concerning the negotiation of a mutually agreed consultation agenda, which was also identified as one of the potential factors leading to consultation satisfaction (Nakatake, 2019; Thonus, 2002).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The tutee's perceptions of writing centre peer tutoring suggested that she expected consultants to provide formative feedback and professional directive guidance through appropriate agenda-setting. In particular, her view on agenda-setting lent support to the writing centre literature, but her perceived unimportance of praise contradicted the general assumption of the role of positive feedback in learning. The implication for writing centre peer tutoring is that tutees may have their idiosyncratic preferences for tutoring strategies which may or may not align with the recommendations in writing centre handbooks and the general literature on teaching and learning.

Although this article is only based on an interview with one undergraduate tutee, it can serve as a springboard for future discussions about tutees' expectations and perspectives on writing centre peer tutoring. Future studies may consider garnering views from a wider range of tutees through large-scale questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Listening to tutees' voice would give writing centre directors some ideas of how consultants may strengthen their ability to address tutees' concerns more effectively.

### **Notes on the Contributor**

Yu Hang Kwan is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong. His doctoral thesis is a multiple-case study of synchronous virtual writing centre peer tutoring in a university in Hong Kong. In addition to writing centres, his research interests include discourse analysis, pragmatics, and second language writing.

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