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Perceptions of the Student-Tutor Relationship with Chinese International Students at a UK University Self-Access Writing Centre

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a study of the student-tutor relationship with reference to Chinese international students in a UK university self-access writing centre. The study collected semi-structured interview data from multiple cohorts, including Chinese students, writing tutors (professional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers rather than student peer tutors) and the writing centre director. Three types of relationships (asymmetrical, symmetrical and quasi-symmetrical) are thereby identified and discussed. The most reported relationship found in this study was an equal/symmetrical relationship. This egalitarianism was interpreted from the perspectives of a) the learning atmosphere; b) responsibility distribution; and c) differences between the writing tutor and the degree programme lecturer (i.e., disciplinary faculty). The findings enhance the understanding of the student-tutor relationship between professional EAP writing tutors and international students in the UK higher education (HE) context, and pedagogical implications are duly put forward.

Keywords: Writing centre, UK higher education, student-tutor relationship, power distribution, international students

Writing centres are “an essential self-access resource” for providing students with out-of-class writing support (Harwood & Koyama, 2020, p. 165). In university writing centres, many of the issues encountered by students and writing tutors in one-to-one consultations arise because of the different power distribution and different expectations as well as understandings of the student-tutor relationship (Dadugblor 2021; Lee, 2016). Writing centres aspire to offer students a non-hierarchical and friendly environment to support the learning of academic writing and rhetoric (Carino, 2003; Corbett, 2013). However, Chinese students, who are the largest portion of international students studying in the UK (UKCISA, 2023), when using writing centres, may find the new pedagogy and learning experience bewildering and markedly different compared to their previous education and culture, which emphasised a teacher-centred approach and a hierarchical teacher-student relationship (Liu & Harwood, 2022; Blau et al., 2002; Harris, 1997). Writing tutors may, in turn, experience issues with international students’ difficulty adjusting to the collaborative pedagogy that writing tutors are trained in (Babcock & Thonus, 2012). Misapprehensions and mismatched

understandings of the student-tutor relationship may lead to various ongoing issues relating to tutor authority, directiveness, and student-tutor power distribution (Lee et al., 2017; Thonus, 2001). Therefore, it is important to examine the student-tutor relationship with international Chinese students in UK university writing centres further, and to arrive at research-led proposals for enhancing the student-tutor relationship in writing centres.

In the UK higher education (HE) context, the one-to-one writing consultation has developed rapidly in recent years to enhance university students' writing skills and to foster their long-term development (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006; Leyland, 2020; Nathan, 2021). Previous writing centre research has been largely focused in North American writing centres, but there can be considerable variation in conditions and contexts, resulting in different writing centre policies, student types and tutor behaviours (LaClare & Franz, 2013; Thonus, 2001). Unlike many US writing centres, students do not get hired as writing centre peer tutors in the UK; instead, there is a preference for using faculty teachers as writing tutors in the UK university writing centres (Nathan, 2021), which is similar to the staffing arrangements in some Asian and European writing centres (Harbord, 2003; Tan, 2011; Zhang & Liu, 2023). According to Leyland (2020), with the increasing number of international students coming to study in the UK and requiring EAP, there has been a need to shift “away from peer tutoring and considerable investment in academic writing support by paid staff” (Leyland (2020, p. 3). The use of “paid staff”/professional EAP teachers has introduced a complex dimension that may influence the student-tutor relationship and power distribution since international students may have preconceptions about the role of the writing tutors as figures of authority (Okuda, 2019).

This article explores the student-tutor relationship between Chinese international students and their writing tutors in a writing centre at a Russell Group UK university from multiple perspectives. The article reports on how Chinese international students, writing tutors and the writing centre director view the student-tutor relationship in one-to-one writing consultations. By drawing upon the voices of different participants, this study deepens our understanding of views of and issues around the second language (L2) student-tutor relationship, and of what kind of authority writing tutors should have. Although this study focuses on the Chinese study cohort, it could also be a useful point of reference and comparison in other HE contexts where writing tutors are helping international students from different cultural backgrounds. The research findings could also be used to inform and improve current practice and research, writing centre management, and pedagogy (Lee, 2016). The guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

- (1) What are the views of Chinese international students regarding the student-tutor relationships in one-to-one writing consultations?
- (2) What are the views of writing tutors regarding Chinese student-tutor relationships in one-to-one writing consultations?
- (3) What are the views of the writing centre director regarding Chinese student-tutor relationships in one-to-one writing consultations?

Student-Tutor Relationship in the Writing Consultation

Previous literature has discussed possible student-tutor relationships in one-to-one writing consultations. The most predominant is an equal/symmetrical/non-hierarchical relationship where the writing tutor usually acts as a peer. This is known as the peer tutoring model and it is advocated as a common relationship in writing centres (Bruffee, 1984; Lunsford, 1991; Rafoth, 2000; Williams, 2005). Waring (2007) found that peer tutors normally identify a general problem and give advice and suggestions, but they let the students make the final decision on the solution. Through this process, a more symmetrical relationship is developed. This symmetrical and collaborative relationship is advocated by writing centres and viewed as empowering students because it emphasises students' ownership of the writing (Winder et al., 2016) and attributes "responsibility for learning to the writer" (Harris 1997, p. 221). Although this has been questioned by past scholars, especially when tutoring L2 learners (Leki, 2017; Thonus, 2014; Nordlof, 2014), this symmetrical relationship is still promoted as a writing centre ideology.

The issues of the student-tutor relationship and the writing tutor's role in fact, overlap to some extent (Abbot et al., 2018). For example, Thonus (2001) not only explored the tutor's role but also discussed the relationship between the writing tutor, the student and the degree programme lecturer. Thonus' (2001) empirical research showed that the tutees viewed tutors as less authoritative than course instructors, whilst tutors sometimes viewed themselves as surrogate course lecturers. The student-tutor relationship is found to be less asymmetrical than the student-lecturer relationship. Lee (2016) explored L2 students' self-perceived roles and participation in writing consultations and argued that although unequal power relations and epistemic asymmetry exist between students and writing tutors, as writing tutors have more knowledge in writing, L2 students can still adopt various sociocultural-interactive and affective learning strategies to take an active role, work collaboratively and build a positive relationship with the writing tutor.

As writing tutors may take multiple roles and may shift their roles (Mack, 2014), the student-tutor relationship may also be flexible. For example, writing tutors can fulfil multiple roles in consultations and these roles can include authoritative ones (Liu & Harwood, 2022; Plummer & Thonus, 1999; Weigle & Nelson, 2004). Thompson (2009) supported this idea by arguing that most empirical studies have suggested more authoritative roles were present at least some of the time in tutor-peer interactions. The most effective tutoring in a writing consultation draws on a palette of different roles and the precise nature of the student-tutor relationship is dependent on the specific situation as well as what is most appropriate for the target student.

Corbett (2013) further suggested that in real-life tutoring practice, the student-tutor relationship can be either hierarchical or non-hierarchical or a mixture of both, and the student and writing tutor share power, depending on who has more authority/expertise in knowledge or writing conventions. For example, when the writing tutor cannot tell the student how to cite a source properly in the student's discipline, the tutor occupies a less powerful role, and this tutorial is less likely to be a hierarchical one. Thus, Corbett (2013) argued that the student-tutor relationship should depend on the tutor/student's position in the tutorial, and the writing tutor can shift to and from directive/non-directive teaching and the relationship will shift between hierarchical/non-hierarchical as needed. However, Corbett's work lacks empirical confirmation and notes the need for further empirical research to examine the issue.

In terms of tutoring L2 students in one-to-one writing consultations, limited studies have explored their power relations and student-tutor relationships, especially in this new HE context of increasing numbers of L2 student writers. The preferred model in the writing centre, which advocates peer collaborative tutoring and equal relationships, has been questioned when tutoring L2 students due to L2 students' cultural and educational background, which can lead them to expect a hierarchical relationship (Williams & Severino, 2004). For many Chinese students, attending writing consultations is not only a means of improving their writing but also a way to "please their teachers" (Blau et al., 2002, p. 28), and it can be difficult for Asian students to see writing tutors as peers with equal status, i.e., "achieving the desired peer collaborative relationship becomes a complex, and often impossible, task of undoing culturally taught behavior" (Blau et al., 2002, p. 28). Welikala and Watkins (2008) found that some international students believe it is not appropriate for students to question tutors, and they prefer more tutor-talk in the tutorials. However, the reality seems to be more subtle, and such L1/L2 dualities in the writing centre might be

considered stereotypical. In sum, it is important to explore the relationship between Chinese international students and their writing tutors, especially in UK HE, where issues of tutoring international students have been less examined.

Methodology

Study Context

The research context of this study is a UK university self-access writing centre. The centre offers one-to-one writing consultations to all registered university students to help with their academic writing outside the traditional classrooms. According to their summary report, 82% of visitors to the writing centre are international students. Each consultation session is 60 minutes, and each student can book up to six sessions per year. The writing centre also offers pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP courses to students who need to enhance their English language as well as academic skills. Each EAP class has 10–18 students, among whom more than 70% are Chinese students. All the writing tutors are language teaching specialists or professional EAP teachers, working as part-time or full-time English language tutors, rather than peer students or course-specific lecturers. The writing centre has a no-proofreading policy, and it does not help with content or discipline-specific knowledge.

Participants and Recruitment of Participants

Three cohorts of participants participated in this research: 1) 33 Chinese university students (from different majors in the sciences, social sciences and arts and humanities, at different levels of study, including undergraduates, postgraduates and PhD students, scoring 6–7.5 in IELTS), 2) seven writing tutors (EAP teachers with 3–7 years of writing centre tutoring experience), and 3) the director of the centre. The director holds a PhD in education and he is the administrator and policy maker of the writing centre. He designs the tutor training, providing a perspective at the policy-maker level. The director was recruited via email. All writing tutors were recruited via a call-for-volunteers email sent out by the director, and all student participants were recruited through personal relationships (referrals from friends/ Chinese WeChat groups), given that, like the student participants, the author is Chinese and has a particular interest in the writing tutorial experiences of Chinese students, stemming from her own experiences as a master's and doctoral student researcher at two writing centres in UK universities.

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative research is underpinned by a social constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2014). It used one-to-one semi-structured interviews with Chinese international

students, writing tutors, and the director to examine their understanding of the student-tutor relationship. Semi-structured interviews were suited to getting participants to express their beliefs and experiences in detail (Kalof et al., 2008). Prior to conducting the interviews, pre-interview questionnaires (see Appendix B) were given to students (to collect basic information such as students' educational background, English proficiency, attendance of pre-sessional courses, and information about the frequency with which they had used the writing centre and past experiences of the writing consultation service). Pre-interview questionnaires (see Appendix C) were also given to tutors (to collect information about educational background, qualifications, tutor training and tutoring experience). The design of the semi-structured interview schedule was informed by existing work on writing consultations, and language tutoring of L2 students, including Blau et al. (2002), Thonus (2001), and Woodward-Kron (2007). The schedule contained several direct and indirect questions related to the student-tutor relationship in writing consultations and flexible follow-up questions were also used (see Appendix A for guiding questions for the students' interview). All interviews with the writing tutors and the director were conducted in English, and all interviews with the students were conducted in Chinese first and then translated into English by the author. A prompt card was given to all participants to discuss the student-tutor relationship (see Appendix D for the prompt card for tutors).

All the data were transcribed, coded and analysed following the thematic analysis (TA) approach. The coding and analysis of the data in this research drew on techniques from Saldaña (2009). The author first read through the raw data and underlined all significant quotes/information in the pre-coding stage (Saldaña, 2009). Then, the author carefully examined the data at a more granular level. The interview data was double-checked and coded again to prevent missing any vital excerpts. The second rater (the PhD supervisor of the author) coded an interview independently, with an agreement rate of 85%. Lastly, the codes were formed into themes.

Findings

Overall, the three kinds of relationships mentioned in the prompt card were identified in this research. These statements described asymmetrical (Relationship A), quasi-symmetrical (Relationship B), and symmetrical (Relationship C) relationships between writing tutors and students. An asymmetrical relationship refers to a hierarchical relationship where the writing tutor is an authoritative teacher—the same as one of the lecturers on the student's degree programme (Corbett, 2013); a quasi-symmetrical relationship refers to a

relationship between the student and the one-to-one writing tutor which is similar to lecturer and student—but the writing tutor is less authoritative than the lecturers on the student’s degree programme; and finally, a symmetrical relationship refers to as an equal or nonhierarchical relationship, in which the writing tutor is an expert on writing, but the student takes responsibility for the ideas and content (Rafoth, 2000; Corbett, 2013). The overall quantitative data illustrating how students and tutors view the student-tutor relationship is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1*Students’ Views of the Student-Tutor Relationship*

Student participants	Students’ view of the student-tutor relationship			
	Relationship A	Relationship B	Relationship C	Others
Student 1			√	
Student 2			√	
Student 3			√	
Student 4			√	
Student 5			√	
Student 6		√		
Student 7			√	
Student 8			√	
Student 9	√			
Student 10			√	
Student 11			√	
Student 12			√	
Student 13	√			
Student 14			√	
Student 15				Between B & C
Student 16			√	
Student 17			√	
Student 18			√	
Student 19			√	Between A & B
Student 20			√	
Student 21		√		
Student 22			√	
Student 23			√	
Student 24			√	
Student 25		√	√	
Student 26			√	
Student 27	√			
Student 28			√	
Student 29			√	
Student 30			√	
Student 31			√	
Student 32			√	
Student 33			√	
Total	3	3	27	2

Table 2*Tutors' Views of the Student-Tutor Relationship*

Writing tutor participants	Tutors' view of the student-tutor relationship			
	Relationship A	Relationship B	Relationship C	Others
Tutor 1			√	
Tutor 2			√	
Tutor 3	√	√	√	
Tutor 4			√	
Tutor 5			√	
Tutor 6		√	√	
Tutor 7		√	√	
Total	1	3	7	

A Symmetrical Student-Tutor Relationship

As noted in the tables above, a symmetrical relationship was recognised by most students (27/33) and tutors (7/11), which challenges previous literature's claim that an equal student-tutor relationship might not be best appropriate for L2 learners (Blau et al., 2002; Thonus, 2014). In the interview, when talking about this symmetrical relationship, the theme of the tutor's lack of disciplinary knowledge was identified by students, and this made the role of writing tutors clearly different from the role of the degree programme lecturers:

“I think she is different from my programme lecturer, in that her focus is not about the subject of my paper and instead focuses on my writing. She is not harsh and won't tell you what you should do.” (Student 11)

“She knows more about writing but I know more knowledge about my major.”
(Student 1)

The above examples reflected that the student-tutor relationship was clearly different from the more asymmetrical, hierarchical, authoritative relationship with the students' degree programme lecturer. In the examples quoted above, Student 11 was an M.A. Management student and Student 1 was a PhD student in Dental Science. These two students' major backgrounds are different from the tutors' education backgrounds. Because the students felt that the tutor could only help with writing and students knew more about disciplinary knowledge, they distributed responsibilities, working collaboratively to improve the writing and their status was more equal.

Additionally, the friendly and relaxed environment of the consultations also contributed to some students ascribing the student-tutor relationship as equal. For instance, Student 12 attended several one-to-one writing consultations, interacting with the same tutor. In the interview, Student 12 claimed she experienced a symmetrical student-tutor relationship

because the atmosphere was comfortable and relaxed, and the writing tutor often used small talk to make her feel relaxed.

Most writing tutors also felt that they had an equal/symmetrical relationship with the students. One reason given is that tutors aimed to promote learner autonomy. For instance, Tutor 2 suggested that she promoted students' independent learning process by using questions to stimulate students' thinking and learning. Writing tutors also reported this equal/symmetrical relationship would be beneficial in terms of encouraging students to be open to sharing their ideas. "I think if they feel that you are above them, and you're like one of the lecturers, then it's difficult for them to be open about how they're feeling about their writing and about asking questions." (Tutor 5)

In addition, this equal status was mentioned by Tutor 4 as a way to avoid ethical issues such as tutors writing the essays for the students. Tutor 4 also pointed out the differences in responsibility distributions between tutor (academic writing) and tutee (disciplinary contents):

Tutor 4: "...you have to be very careful not to discuss the idea too much. I do ask students questions about their subjects. It might be quite a good way of getting them to think about their writing naturally."

A Quasi-Symmetrical Relationship

Concerning Relationship B, three students in the interview chose this relationship as the student-tutor relationship they perceived in writing consultations:

Student 6: "He did not use GTM (Grammar Translation Method). It doesn't feel that traditional. In addition, he has a broader knowledge about writing than me. He led the whole session and I followed him. He is not that authoritative. But he is still the authority of the session."

Student 21: "The writing tutor is not that authoritative. I should say he is not harsh. I don't think the relationship is equal. He must be a superior to me, as during the session he taught me."

Student 26: "B. because I am not good at thinking by myself and the tutor leads sometimes, which I need. But the atmosphere was still very relaxed that the tutor was not so authoritative, or let's say pushy."

From these excerpts, there are some clear similarities. Students 6, 21 and 26 all pointed out that the tutors' attitude was not authoritative but the tutors still performed an authoritative role during the session. In short, the students felt they themselves occupied

positions of a slightly lower status, as the tutors had better knowledge than them concerning writing. However, the tutors respected the students and created a relatively relaxed environment that resulted in students feeling the student-tutor relationship was less unequal than in a disciplinary lecturer-student situation.

When it came to the writing tutors, none of them thought the relationship was solely quasi-symmetrical. However, two tutors thought their student-tutor relationship could be Relationship B or C, depending on different situations. Tutor 7 explained how he feels in the interview:

Tutor 7: “(Relationship A) In a one-to-one situation, that would feel a little bit unnatural and unnecessary to me, not as in a big classroom. Relationship B...I suppose in a sense, I agree with that. I think students have to remember that their lecturers have the final authority. They do the marking...but I think we’re both authoritative in different ways. The lecturers are authoritative in terms of their subject knowledge and we [tutors] are authoritative in terms of our writing knowledge. For C, I think we’re like equals in the sense that the student is the person who is writing this. Really the student has all the knowledge. We’re trying to solve a problem together.”

Tutor 7 felt that an authoritative relationship is unnatural compared with giving large classroom lectures. The tutor also suggested students’ degree programme lecturers should be the final authority because they act as assessors, whereas writing tutors have expertise in writing knowledge. Thus, their relationship with students can be closest to B or C.

The Asymmetrical Student-Tutor Relationship

The third student-tutor relationship to discuss is Relationship A. Only three students and none of the tutors reported experiencing a completely asymmetrical student-tutor relationship, which is called a “power-distance relationship” by Raby (2020, p. 3).

Student 13 and Student 27 reported that Relationship A best described their consultations with writing tutors. However, their reasons differ. Student 13 felt negative about her lower status in these meetings: “I think the tutor has more knowledge in writing so she was powerful and authoritative. But I don’t like it”, while Student 27 felt the experience was more positive: “I think she [the tutor] is really professional, and this makes me feel she is authoritative. I’d like to take her suggestions in writing and follow her lead.” Again, the authority and expertise of the tutor highlighted by Student 13 was in the field of writing rather than content knowledge.

For writing tutors, only Tutor 3 mentioned that the student-tutor relationship can be any one of the three relationships depending on different situations and different students but again not purely asymmetrical. He also mentioned that could change during the consultations: “Yeah, it definitely develops and evolves.”

Overall, this authoritative tutor relationship was very rarely described in the interview data and is not claimed by either party to be the common student-tutor relationship.

The Director’s Beliefs about the Student-Tutor Relationship

The director also discussed his beliefs about the student-tutor relationship. He suggested that the writing centre encourages a student-tutor equal relationship, but the relationship varies depending on different tutors and students:

The director: “Probably depends on the tutor. We try to encourage a Tutor C type of relationship and we normally talk about what many people refer to as symmetry of power. However, some people from different cultural backgrounds may be used to a more asymmetric relationship. Another reason to encourage this type of more symmetrical relationship is that it encourages students to be more open and sometimes agree and disagree because sometimes tutors might say in an annotated bibliography, you should include a bit of evaluation and then you should say why the source may be useful and the student might say yes, but in my student handbook, what it says is I should just have a little summary similar to the abstract. It’s very useful for our tutor to learn that. So, in most cases, I would say the type of relationship that we see is probably B. Where students think that our tutors have a similar status but they should follow the advice of their subject tutors because the reason why they are more authoritative is because they do the marking.”

According to the director, the writing centre encourages an equal relationship because the students need to be responsible for the authorship of the text, and it encourages students to be open to exchange necessary information and negotiation. However, he admitted that students from some cultural backgrounds are more used to a more asymmetric relationship. Overall, the director felt that a B relationship was seen more frequently in consultations where tutors have a similar status with lecturers but are less authoritative.

Discussion and Implications

This research explored student-tutor relationships at a UK university self-access writing centre from the perspectives of Chinese students, writing tutors and the writing centre

director, as well as factors that may influence how participants interpret the power distribution in the writing consultation. The aim of this study is to deepen our understanding of the international student-tutor relationship in the writing centre because this relationship influences students' engagement in the tutoring experience specifically, but also influences their development of academic literacy more generally. Tutoring can also facilitate students' cognitive growth (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Kuh, 2009; Lee et al., 2017), and the findings of this research can lead to proposals to improve writing centre support in HE.

Three kinds of student-tutor relationships are identified and discussed in this paper. The most predominant is an equal/symmetrical relationship, which challenges the past claim that Asian students may not be comfortable with such a relationship (Blau et al., 2002; Thonus, 2001; Welikala & Watkins, 2008; Williams & Severino, 2004). However, there may be an element of the other two relationships (quasi-symmetrical and asymmetrical) in the writing consultations, and there were broad individual differences between different situations and different tutors.

That an equal/symmetrical student-tutor relationship was predominant raises issues of power distribution, authority and egalitarianism in writing centre support in HE. The egalitarianism in this study could be interpreted from the perspective of the atmosphere (friendly and relaxed), responsibility distribution (content knowledge versus writing knowledge), and whether the writing tutor is as authoritative as the degree programme lecturer. These three interpretations are expanded as follows:

First, the friendly and relaxed atmosphere seems to make some students ascribe the student-tutor relationship as equal, different from Asian education's hierarchical embedded power structure (Lee et al., 2017). This finding also resonated with previous literature which mentioned that writing tutors could adopt affective strategies and social strategies to build rapport while scaffolding L2 learners' language learning in the writing centre as ways to manage learners' feelings and cultural understanding (Lee, 2016).

Second, the power distribution in the writing consultation may be related to responsibility/knowledge distribution (writing knowledge versus disciplinary knowledge) between the writing tutor and the student. Tutors aimed to promote students' learner autonomy, requiring that students take responsibility for content and ideas while writing tutors take responsibility for academic writing knowledge (Evans et al., 2019).

Third, a comparison with the degree programme lecturer also influenced participants' interpretation of the student-tutor relationship in one-to-one writing consultations. Previous studies indicate that compared with degree programme lecturers, writing tutors are often

regarded as less authoritative and the student-tutor relationship is viewed as less asymmetrical (Lee et al., 2017; Thonus, 2001). One possible reason is that tutors lack grading responsibilities (Lee et al., 2017). Thus, the writing tutor's status was understood as more symmetrical compared to the disciplinary lecturer.

Another possible reason in this context that Chinese students reported a more equal relationship with tutors might relate to their knowledge of UK academic traditions. Most of the Chinese student participants in this research had attended pre-sessional language courses, conferring a certain knowledge of UK academic conventions (Bennett et al., 2007). Based on their experiences of pre-sessionals, they expect a fairly symmetrical relationship with the writing centre tutor because they have experienced a fairly symmetrical relationship with pre-sessional tutors. Pre-sessional tutors often, in fact, also serve as writing centre tutors in UK HE, and so it is hardly surprising that in the writing centre, they enact a similar symmetrical role to the role they perform when acting as a pre-sessional tutor. All of this suggests that students' background concerning pre-sessionals in the host institution, as well as their background in their home country, should be taken into consideration to understand their interpretation of the student-tutor interaction in the writing centre (Winder et al., 2016).

Interestingly, Leyland (2020) also stated that although writing tutors cannot help with major-related knowledge, they could still invoke a knowledge asymmetry because they have a superior knowledge of academic writing and sources and could still establish an expert-novice relationship with the students. This might be a reason why some students feel the tutor-student relationship is somewhat asymmetrical in this study. However, it should be understood that even though the tutors use their expertise in writing to scaffold students' learning, this does not mean the tutor controls the whole tutorial session (Winder et al., 2016).

Several pedagogical implications are proposed based on these findings: First, in order to build an empowering and caring student-tutor relationship in the writing centre, writing tutors could pay attention to the language they use when interacting with Chinese students to make students feel relaxed and empowered, and they could use non-verbal scaffolding strategies to give students a sense of being understood, valued and respected (Patrick, 2020; Raby, 2020; Welikala & Watkins, 2008). Second, negotiations and discussions between writing tutors and students on the consultation goals, expectations, and responsibility/power distribution should be incorporated during the sessions to manage epistemological beliefs. This could be achieved not only in the writing centre but also outside the writing centre, such as during introduction week and departmental classrooms (Colvin, 2007). Third, for tutor

training, it would also be helpful to add discussions of the student-tutor relationship, the relationship with L2 learners and the cultivation of cultural awareness (Powers, 1993; Raby, 2020). Influential factors affecting the tutor-student relationship include Chinese students' individual differences in terms of their needs, level of study, familiarity with UK academic culture, language proficiency, self-perceived linguistic confidence, personality, differences in writing tutors' teaching style, tutors' familiarity with the Chinese culture, and the level of engagement of both parties. It is also important for writing tutors to become familiar with Chinese students' expectations concerning the tutor-student relationship.

Conclusion

Understanding student-tutor relationships in the writing consultation is important as it reveals the social relations and power distribution during the tutorial. This study discussed the student-tutor relationship with Chinese students at a UK university self-access writing centre. A symmetrical relationship is most predominantly found in this research. This helps the writing centre to maintain its distinctive identity from the disciplinary classroom, with writing centre tutors performing the role of writing expert who helps with higher-order concerns such as organisation, structure and writing conventions, but not content, and it promotes collaboration. This will have a significant influence on students' perceptions, expectations and evaluation of the writing centre (Okuda, 2019). The symmetrical relationship requires both sides to make an effort to build this preferred model with interactive discourse, an equal/non-hierarchical social relationship, negotiable knowledge and distributed responsibility. However, it should be understood that the fundamental power (such as writing and linguistic knowledge) of the writing tutor cannot be denied (Winder et al., 2016), especially with writing centres that use professional EAP teachers (rather than peer students). Thus, this study prompts writing centre practitioners and researchers to further consider the ideal student-tutor relationship in university writing centres.

In future research, it would be very interesting to also collect departments' views and also involve students of different backgrounds to understand the issue from the perspective of additional groups. Future work could also investigate how the student-tutor relationship in the writing centre could influence the student-faculty/personal tutor/lecturer relationship in students' subject departments.

Notes on the Contributor

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Appendix A

Guiding Questions for Students' Interview

1. Ask for details about the tutor training s/he had for tutoring one-to-one writing consultations.
2. Now I'd like to ask you about the relationship between yourself and your writing tutor. First read the prompt card. Please talk about EACH relationship and talk about the extent to which you feel the writing tutor and you have this relationship.
3. Which of the following statements do you think best describes your relationship with the writing tutor?
4. Is the student-tutor relationship the same or different from your previous education in China? What are the differences? Can you make a comparison to the relationship you have with: (i) your lecturers of your degree programme and (ii) your EAP teacher during the pre-session course (if you attended this)?

Appendix B

Pre-interview questionnaire for students

Thank you for your participation in this research. Before the interview starts, I want to ask a few questions about your profile and your writing consultation experiences.

Personal Information:

1. **Name:** _____
2. **IELTS Score:** _____
3. **Degree Programme:** _____
4. **Degree Level:**
 - ☐ Undergraduate
 - ☐ Master's
 - ☐ PhD
 - ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Writing Consultation Background

5. Total Usage of Individual Writing Consultation:

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 1-3 times
- ☐ 4-5 times
- ☐ 6 or more times

6. Usage of Individual Writing Consultation in This Academic Year:

- ☐ None
- ☐ Once
- ☐ Twice
- ☐ Three times
- ☐ Four or more times

7. Text Type for Writing Consultation:

- ☐ Summary/Abstract
- ☐ Article/Book Review
- ☐ Experiment/Project Report
- ☐ Proposal/Plan
- ☐ Journal Article

- ☐ Essay
- ☐ Annotated bibliography
- ☐ Unstructured writing
- ☐ Others

Appendix C

Pre-interview questionnaire for writing tutors

Thank you for your participation in this research. Before the interview starts, I want to ask a few questions about your profile and your writing consultation experiences.

Personal Information:

1. **Name:**
2. **Current University Affiliation:**
3. **Highest Degree Achieved:**

☐ Undergraduate

☐ Master's

☐ PhD

☐ Other (please specify):

4. **Teaching Qualifications:** Please indicate if you hold any of the following:

☐ Cert TEFLA/CELTA

☐ Dip TEFLA/DELTA

☐ PGCE

☐ Other (please specify)

Writing Consultation Experience:

5. **Describe any training or workshops you've attended related to writing center consultation:**

[Provide your response here]

6. **Years of Tutoring:**

☐ Less than 1 year

☐ 1-2 years

☐ 3-4 years

☐ 5-6 years

☐ 7 or more years

7. **Institutional Diversity:** How many different institutions have you worked in as a writing consultation tutor? Please list them below:

[Provide details of each institution]

8. **Current Consultation Frequency:** On average, how many individual writing consultations do you conduct with students per week?

- ☐ 0-3
- ☐ 4-6
- ☐ 7-9
- ☐ 10 or more

Appendix D

Prompt Card for Tutors

Now I'd like to ask you about the relationship between yourself and your students... First read the prompt card.

Which of the following statements do you think best describes your relationship as a writing tutor with your students?

Please talk about EACH relationship and talk about the extent to which you feel the student and you have this relationship.

Then pick the relationship you feel best describes the relationship between you and your student For this question, you may pick as many relationships as you wish.

Student-tutor relationship in the one-to-one writing consultations:

Tutor A: I am an authoritative teacher—the same as one of my tutees' other lecturers on their degree programme.

Tutor B: The relationship between my writing tutees and me is similar to lecturer and student—but I am less authoritative or powerful than their other lecturers on their degree programme.

Tutor C: My writing tutees and me are like equals. We work together to improve my tutees' writing. I am an expert on writing, but they take responsibility for the ideas and content of their writing.