



Spoken written-language in writing center talk

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ABSTRACT

Our goals are to examine the validity of concerns about plagiarism and, more speculatively, about short circuiting students' thinking in writing center tutoring. Specifically, we describe spoken written-language (SWL), the oral language that writing center tutors produce for potential use in the student writers' written products. We analyze SWL from a specialized corpus of 37 conferences in terms of three variables: (1) the length of each SWL occurrence, (2) the frequency with which SWL occurs in a given conference, and (3) the extent to which an SWL occurrence is ready for placement in a written text. Our analysis indicates that student writers' use of tutors' SWL in their papers does not represent plagiarism and that, in fact, it may help student writers move forward in their writing.

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1. Introduction

Every day during the conferences that take place in university writing centers, writing tutors help student writers formulate wording for their papers (see, for example, Thompson, 2009, p. 431). Tutors provide this sort of help both when conferences focus on generating and developing a first draft and when conferences focus on revising existing drafts. For example, in the conference between Tutor 1 (T1) and Student Writer 1 (S1) excerpted below, T1 provided potential wording for S1's paper:

Excerpt 1:

T1: You could maybe say 'movies,' especially 'kid-oriented movies' or something like that just to be more specific.¹

In excerpt 1, T1 supplied spoken (oral) language, a compound-modifying phrase ('kid-oriented movies') for S1 to use to help describe the scope of her paper's topic. Here, as in previous research (Mackiewicz, 2017, 2018), we call such oral discourse "spoken written-language," hereafter SWL. With this term, we refer to the spoken language that both tutors and student writers produce for potential use in the student writer's written product. However, because our analysis is concerned with SWL's potential misuse by student writers, we focus on tutors' SWL—that is, on their suggestions for words, phrases, and clauses student writers might include in their papers.

To further clarify what SWL is, we think it is useful to point out what SWL is not. First, SWL differs from language that tutors use to talk in a meta-analytic way about the content of student writers' texts, as when T39 described what S39 might say about Walt Disney:

Excerpt 2:

T39: And I think that there'd be a more older perception of him because he has been gone for so long that we don't even think about him as a real person. We just think about the company. And that could be something you could talk about too.

In excerpt 2 above, T39 did not supply potential words for S39's paper. Rather, T39 referred to the subject matter of the paper.

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¹ We use single quotation marks to denote tutor-supplied wording, which below this excerpt we define as SWL.

Second, SWL differs from reading aloud—those times when tutors simply read aloud existing written discourse—as T35 did before commenting on S35’s paper:

Excerpt 3:

T35: Ok. Alright. Let’s see. “I was thirteen-years-old with longer hair in the eighth grade, and I was ready for high school.”²

In the discourse in excerpt 3, T35 read aloud from S35’s draft paper. Subsequently, she moved on to offer advice about ways to punctuate the sentence.

Tutors’ use of SWL has worried many writing center directors. Some faculty members pursue—occasionally with zeal—what they perceive as too much tutor help. Such faculty members can perceive the SWL that tutors provide and that student writers use as plagiarism, and they consequently may accuse both tutors and student writers of academic dishonesty. Further, by providing wording for student writers’ papers, tutors may short circuit student writers’ learning. Writing studies research in general and writing center research in particular have, for the most part, neglected the readily apparent phenomenon of SWL within the language of one-to-one talk about writing.

This article describes and provides examples of tutors’ SWL in terms of three variables: (1) the number of words in each tutor-spoken occurrence of SWL, (2) the number of times tutors used SWL in each of the 37 conferences, and (3) the readiness of the SWL to be included directly into a student writer’s paper. Based on the quantitative analysis, we conclude that because the occurrences of tutors’ SWL are infrequent and short, SWL does not open doors to realistic accusations of plagiarism. Based on the qualitative analysis of excerpts from our conferences, we closely examine tutors’ SWL in terms of its possible inclusion in a written text and describe its uses. Based also on the qualitative analysis, we speculate that, although it can take over students’ responsibility for their own writing, SWL can also enhance student writers’ learning by reducing their frustration and by providing models of well-crafted phrases and clauses used in academic and other kinds of writing.

2. A brief description of writing centers

In university writing centers across the world, student writers work with tutors to improve diverse types of papers—from essays for first-year composition courses to capstone-project reports to theses and dissertations. They bring in papers written for a wide range of disciplines as well, from anthropology, to limnology, to zoology. They also bring in papers intended for readers other than instructors: graduate school and scholarship application essays and job and internship cover letters make frequent appearances in writing centers as well.

As [Boquet \(1999\)](#) and a number of other writing center scholars (e.g., [Carino, 1996](#); [North, 1984](#)) have related, “autonomous” writing centers in the United States—spaces not necessarily associated with a specific writing course—began to form in the 1940s (p. 467). Their prominence grew, however, in the 1970s, in the advent of open-admissions policies and the perceived crisis in student literacy that those policies generated. Boquet writes about their initial charge:

The theme of crisis intervention is repeated over and over again in the scant histories written about writing centers in the 1970s, as writing centers were created to fix problems that university officials had difficulty even naming, things like increasing enrollment, larger minority populations, and declining (according to the public) literacy skills. (p. 472)

The mission of most writing centers has developed in the intervening years, evolving from an overriding concern with pedagogical triage to concern for helping student writers enter the disciplinary conversations that they encounter during their academic careers.

In writing centers, student writers work typically one-to-one with a trained writing tutor who uses a range of strategies to scaffold student writers’ learning about writing and who serves as a reader in order to help student writers understand the clarity of their message. In the process, student writers also, most likely, improve a particular paper (or other text), but improving student writers’ individual texts is not the primary goal of most writing centers. Instead, most writing center tutors strive to impart skills that will teach student writers to improve their papers themselves and strive to serve as real audiences.

Now, writing centers have expanded across the globe. The Writing Center Directory delineates over 1720 writing centers in the United States, and it lists over 360 others in countries ranging from Afghanistan and Albania to Mexico and Morocco to Ukraine and United Arab Emirates ([Mackiewicz, 2017](#), p. 1). And writing center scholars outside the United States have begun to investigate how one-to-one talk about writing works in their particular contexts. For example, [Chang \(2013\)](#) relates how writing centers in Asia, particularly Taiwan, developed, and [Tan \(2011\)](#) examines the ways that writing centers have developed in Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, as well as in Greece and France.

No matter their location, writing centers tend to exist within a theoretical universe like the one that [Ivanič \(2004\)](#) describes, a “discourses of writing” framework that “treats the textual aspects of language as embedded within, and inseparable from, mental and social aspects” (p. 222). Such a theoretical underpinning also includes what [Lea and Street \(2006\)](#) describe as an “academic literacies perspective.” In this perspective, tutors help student writers “investigate the range of genres, modes, shifts, transformations, representations, meaning-making processes, and identities involved in academic learning within and across academic contexts” (p. 376). In short, the goals of many writing centers coincide with theory that views writing—including writing generated in academic settings—within broader cognitive and contextual patterns.

3. Literature review

For over 20 years, writing studies scholars such as [Newkirk \(1995\)](#) have noted the importance of the talk that goes on in teacher–student writer conferences. Indeed, others such as [Patthey-Chavez and Ferris \(1997\)](#) have investigated the outcomes of those conferences in student

² We use double quotation marks to denote instances of reading aloud.

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