Tutors at a Writing Center in Japan: Characteristics of Their Tutoring

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I. Introduction

Recently Japanese university English Curricula have been focusing more on academic writing. Many universities in the United States have writing centers to support students on their writings, while not many Japanese universities have them. As one of the first universities in Japan, School of International Liberal Studies (SILS) at Waseda University opened its writing center in 2004. Since then, tutors who are graduate students have been supporting undergraduate students.1 The tutors can be categorized into two groups: those who conduct sessions in English and those who do in Japanese. The purpose of this study is to characterize those two groups and to discuss differences in their styles of sessions between them.

II. Method

Participants: Tutors who conduct session in English are mainly native speakers of English, while those who do in Japanese are native speakers of Japanese. They major in various fields and none of them are majoring in TESOL. Their TOEFL scores are higher than 600.

Materials: The SILS students who use the Center bring their writings and tutors support them to become better writers. Tutors leave notes on the writings while they work on them and write a report after they finish tutoring. This study

1 The SILS Writing Center has changed its name to the Waseda University Writing Center from October 2008 and any student at Waseda can use the Center now. This study focuses only on SILS students.
examines the notes and reports to analyze how those tutors conduct sessions.

III. Discussion

A: Analysis of the notes

Tutors' notes left on students' writings indicate that tutors who conduct sessions in English tend to encourage students to use difficult words or phrases, which do not match their level of English. In contrast, those tutors who conduct sessions in Japanese are likely to suggest using words or phrases that match the level of students' English proficiency.

B: Analysis of the reports

Tutors' reports show that the tutors who conduct sessions in English focus more on grammar and word choice, while those who do in Japanese use their sessions more on structure or logic of students' writings.

Previous studies do not suggest in details how staffs at writing centers train their tutors for tutoring non-native students. This study, however, suggests that staffs should give opportunities for their tutors to study how they can teach English as a foreign language. They can also suggest tutors to study a language that students speak as their first language. Understanding the concept of language teaching and students' first language helps tutors conduct sessions that matches with ideal sessions for non-native students.

References