

Investigating Teacher Perception of the KUIS Writing Centre

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Abstract

In the academic year of 2014-15, there were 23 ELI teachers providing out-of-class support services for writing through 15-minute sessions at the ELI Writing Center (WC) at KUIS. In the previous project, “Investigating Learner Perceptions of the KUIS’ Self-Access Writing Centre,” Morrison, B. and Tu, L. (2015) focused on the learners’ perception, and found the learners’ overall experience at the WC to be mostly positive, with the WC teachers being the key deciding factor in the overall experience. As a follow-up research on user perception of the ELI Writing Centre, this project aims to investigate the teachers’ perception: their overall experience of providing writing help through the WC, their reflection on the instructional feedback, their understanding of WC’s role and function, and their opinion on the overall effectiveness of the WC service.

Introduction

University writing centers can be set up in a multitude of ways, and the writers who use the service can come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The tutors staffed at the writing centre can also be as diverse in their experience and knowledge as the writers they serve. Writing centers can play different roles from institution to institution. Despite the fact that there is no singular model or set of guidelines, a physical writing centre is universally acknowledged as a place for verbal exchange between a writing student and the writing tutor with the aim to improve the student’s writing. (Harris, 1988) According to Baylor School Writing Tutor Manual (2007), an ideal writing centre is a space where learners can explore issues in writing through two-way dialogue with a tutor outside

the traditional classroom. It is a student-centered site operated within “non-evaluative relationships of trust” between the tutor and the writer.

The Writing Centre at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), nestled inside the self-access learning center providing a number of similar tutoring services, is a well-used and well-liked space from the KUIS students’ perspective. According to a recent study by Morrison and Tu (2015), one out of every five students in the university had visited the WC in the fall semester of 2014, and the same group of students had reported a high 92.5% average satisfaction rate of their WC visits. From the same study, we also learn that the writing centre teacher, the perceived quality of teacher feedback and attitude can dictate a student’s user experience using the WC.

The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors (2010) outlined the multiple roles an ideal writing centre tutor plays: the ally, who is an encouraging friend providing support with empathy; the coach, who encourage the writer from the sidelines; the commentator who provides perspective where needed; the collaborator who worked with the writer through two-way exchange; the writing “expert” providing wisdom and answers; the learner who becomes the audience of the writer in their field of expertise; and the counselor who listens and motivates. (Harris, 1980)

This research is a response to the 2015 study titled “Investigating Learner Perceptions of the KUIS’ Self-Access Writing Centre,” in which Morrison and Tu looked closely at the extent to which KUIS students were satisfied with their experience using the ELI Writing Centre. This study will investigate the *teacher perceptions* and their general attitude towards the KUIS Writing Centre, and consider the extent to which they were satisfied with their

experience tutoring writers at the WC.

Context

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is a private university located in the suburbs of Tokyo in Chiba prefecture, Japan. The small-size university, servicing approximately 2,500 students in four academic departments, is known for its focus on foreign language education. For the teaching of English, more than 70 teachers from English-speaking countries are employed through the school's English Language Institute (ELI), providing courses that are taught exclusively in English.

KUIS is also well-known for its effort in promoting learner autonomy in English education, and has one building designated as the university's Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC), which provides advisory services and self-learning materials and a variety of multimedia resources for English language learning, is popular among students.

The KUIS Writing Centre, currently located in the SALC building, is managed and staffed by the ELI, which also provides similar one-to-one tutoring services such as the Practice Centre, in-which students sign up for 15-minutes of English conversations with an ELI instructor, and the Online Writing Center, in which writing and feedback were both sent through email. To use the Writing Centre, students can up for one 15-minute one-to-one, face-to-face appointment each day. Like all advisory and tutoring services provided in the SALC building, WC appointments are conducted in English. In order to align with the SALC's autonomous learning principal in respecting the learners' agency, WC appointments are voluntary, and the students are expected to have questions prepared and inform the teacher prior to meeting time the specific area in their writing to focus on When using the

online appointment system, students are required to select one area of their writing to receive teacher feedback: spelling and mechanics, grammar, and content and structure.

Each full-time ELI teacher is required to be on “duty” in one of the tutoring services in the SALC building for two 90-minute class periods a week. In the school year of 2015, the teachers could choose from four options to fulfill their twice a week “ELI duty” periods: the Writing Centre (WC), the Online Writing Centre (OWC), the Practice Centre (PC), and Yellow Sofas Lounge Area (YS). Among these tutoring services, the WC and PC are face-to-face and require appointments booked through an online system; the OWC requires that students send in their writing work to a designated email address, while YS does not require formal appointments. Students are encouraged to join ELI teachers at the lounge area and have casual conversations throughout the school day.

Staffing these learning and tutoring centers with full time lecturers makes these tutoring services attractive to the students, and it also has functional merits. Paul Kei Matsuda (2012) suggested that language instructors, or “experts in the teaching of writing or language,” who are experienced in giving feedback on global issues in writing, can be better tutors for L2 writers who lack the linguistic knowledge to effectively communicate in their field of expertise.

In the school year of 2015, during which this study was conducted, there were twenty 90-minute class periods available for one-on-one consultations each week, with an ELI teacher on duty at the WC for each 90-minute period. The 20 periods of Writing Centre duty were shared by 13 ELI teachers. For KUIS students seeking English writing help or feedback, this setup provided up to 120 appointment opportunities each week for 15-minute

one-to-one, face-to-face tutoring session with an ELI lecturer.

Previous Research

Morrison and Tu (2015) investigated the students perception of the KUIS Writing Centre, specifically how satisfied they are with the service and feedback they received at the WC, and whether or not they believed their requests were met and catered for by conducting an anonymous survey, asking than 500 students who used the Writing Center in the fall semester of 2014 to give their honest opinion about the experience at the KUIS WC. The study yielded 122 survey responses and 45 extended comments in both English and Japanese.

This result also explained the high WC usage rate of more than 20% from the student body of about 2,500. The survey results showed that from the learners' perspective, feedback on grammar was the most requested as well as the most popular teacher-initiated type of feedback, showing that "the WC instructors appear to be just as concerned with accuracy as the students." (154) The majority of WC users at KUIS had a very positive experience using the service provided by the ELI teachers at the Writing Centre, which received a high 92.5% satisfaction rate from the survey respondents; 78% of the subjects reported having received teacher-initiated feedback that went beyond their initial request, with 86% of the learners considering these additional feedback to be helpful. (157)

Aside from the numerical data which suggested a mostly positive perception of the KUIS Writing Centre, the study by Morrison and Tu also collected a number of narrative comments from the participating students. These comments suggested the two major factors influencing an L2 learner's overall experience using the WC: the limited appointment time,

and the learners' perceived attitude of the WC instructors.

In the study's conclusion, Morrison and Tu suggested that the majority of the negative comments were linked to the time limit, and how it was insufficient for a productive discussion on writing, and could negatively affected the quality of WC tutor's feedback. "When requesting ideas for improving the Centre, the overwhelming majority of the comments received started with the suggestion of extending the time limit, with most of these comments requesting more flexibility than the current one-fifteen-minute-session-per-day policy." (161)

The second major influencing factor on the user experience is the WC instructors, as the word "teacher" was the keyword contained in almost every narrative comment in both English and Japanese. Most of the positive comments about WC teachers praised their perceived kindness or friendliness, which could mean that they spoke slowly, or provided specific examples of grammar or vocabulary usage. Learners also indicated they appreciated when teachers initiated feedback, or provided additional feedback that went beyond their initial request, showing that they valued the ELI teachers' perceived expertise. One quoted comment stated, "I don't want the teachers to just answer my questions. I want them to teach me something they feel is more important." (157) Another observed trend in the students' positive comments is that the learners appreciated when the instructors praised their writing before providing corrective feedback. (157)

However, the study also summarized a number of negative comments regarding WC tutors. A few comments touched on a perceived "unwillingness" of WC teachers to invest time or effort in providing detailed feedback or instruction. One quoted student comment

wrote, "... there are teachers who want to be there, and those who don't. Sorry to say but only those who want to work at the WC should be there." (159). These negative comments also mentioned how the teachers seemed to be rushing or being unnecessarily strict about the 15-minute time limit when the WC was not busy. There are also commenters who expressed frustration with the native-speaking teachers' inability to adequately explain rules in English grammar, the type of feedback that most students request when signing for WC appointments.

The overwhelming consensus on the factor of "teacher" had inspired this follow-up research on what the teachers' had to say, and their overall perception of the Writing Centre. Thus the aim of this research is to investigate the general attitude of the teachers working on the other side of the WC table.

The extended comments in the previous research about different student experiences with individual teachers had prompted the question on whether or not there is a consensus among ELI teachers about what the Writing Centre is deigned to do, a "best practice" or standard procedure to approach giving feedback during the limited amount of appointment time, and whether or not the teachers were satisfied with the Writing Centre in terms of how it is set up and how it is run. Thus the following research questions are formed:

- 1) Why did the teachers choose to do Writing Centre duty over other types of services?
- 2) From the teachers' perspective, what is the main role or purpose of the KUIS Writing Centre?
- 3) From the teachers' perspective, how effective is the Writing Centre in playing that role?
- 4) How do the teachers rate their overall experience of working at the WC? And how

does the experience compare to previous experiences of working at similar WC setups elsewhere?

Research Design

Participants

The participants of this study are full-time English teachers who were currently employed in the ELI, with each of them qualified and had the option to work at the KUIS Writing Centre for their twice-a-week duty periods. These teachers come from different countries, have spent different amount of time in Japan, and have varied professional experience in language teaching and research. They have also been employed by the KUIS ELI for different number of years. The common denominator for the subjects who provided data for this research is that they were all full-time ELI teachers who had the option to work at the Writing Centre for their tutoring duty, and all had personal opinions about the ELI Writing Centre: what it is, how it is used, and how well it is being used.

During the spring and fall semesters of 2015, 27 ELI teachers had participated in this study, each providing extensive qualitative data through an anonymous, recorded one-on-one oral interview.

Procedures

This study seeks to gather qualitative data from the ELI teachers and investigate their overall perception of the KUIS Writing Centre through one-on-one oral interviews, where each participant was encouraged to share their insights and opinions freely. To encourage sharing of their honest opinions, the interviews were kept anonymous, the atmosphere casual, and the conversation free-flowing. Each session could last from five minutes to

more than an hour, depending on the participant, and their responses. Even though the prepared questions were presented to each participant, they were often modified or phrased differently based the nature and direction of the conversation. The oral interviews were recorded and later transcribed for this study.

The first part of the interview was getting basic background information of each participant. It consists of asking each participating teacher the number of years they have worked at the KUIS ELI, whether or not they had had the experience working at the KUIS Writing Centre, the number of years they had working at the KUIS Writing Center.

The second part of the interview seeks to provide some quantitative measure for this project. For this section, each participant was asked to answer a set of questions by giving a rating based on their personal opinion. A five-point scale was used, with one being “very poor” and five being “very good.”

- 1) If you have worked at the KUIS Writing Centre, how would you rate your experience?
- 2) If you have not worked at the KUIS Writing Centre, how would you rate your overall impression of the WC setup?
- 3) How would you rate the effectiveness of the Writing Centre in accomplishing what it is designed to do?

Following these questions, the teachers were asked to elaborate on the reasons behind each rating.

The final part of the interview includes three main questions that were asked in each session.

- 1) In your opinion, what are the strengths of the ELI Writing Centre?
- 2) What are the weaknesses?
- 3) Do you have any practical suggestions to improve the WC?

This section challenges each interviewee to articulate exactly what they liked or disliked about the Writing Centre. The participants were often asked to elaborate by providing specific examples from their experiences. A number of teachers shared their previous experience working at a similar WC set-up in other universities, while other shared experience using a similar tutoring service as undergraduate or graduate school students.

Results

1) Why did the teachers choose to do Writing Centre duty over other types of types of services?

Among the participants with experience working at the KUIS WC, 45.5% of the teachers indicated that they enjoyed teaching writing and helping students improve. 10% of the teachers who have had WC duty also indicated that they had previous experience tutoring writing in a similar facility, while 27.3% of teachers admitted that they chose the WC over other options because they perceived WC as “easy work.” One ELI teacher commented, “I like teaching the writing class, but admittedly, another part of it is that it's usually just one of the more relaxed, I think of the different ELI duties that are available.” Another commented on the benefit of having a 15-minute limit for each appointment, “..so

you can get some work done and students won't monopolize your time," when compared to other duty options.

A few writing teachers liked the opportunity of working one-on-one with their students outside of class time. One teacher commented that they sometimes used their WC "duty time" as "office hours," to work with their students one-on-one on writing, giving learners the individual attention they needed but could not obtain in a traditional classroom. "Sometimes I would write comments or feedback on their paper, and they would have questions. I just told them to sign up for WC appointments with me to get more detailed feedback."

Teachers who chose other duty areas instead of the WC commented on their frustration over teaching writing. "Students are too passive. I don't find it satisfying." The two main reasons for teachers who had worked at the WC, but chose not to continue, are their dissatisfaction with the low usage rate and its effect on helping develop student writing. "It's not effective. We hardly get any appointments." Other teachers point out that mostly remedial nature of the WC, "we fix their writing, give them free editing, so they get better grades, but what we do have no long term impact on their writing or their English."

2) From the teachers' perspective, what is the prescriptive role or purpose of the KUIS Writing Centre?

82% of the participants called the KUIS Writing Centre "a place to help students develop their writing skills," and when asked to be more specific in their descriptions, one teacher added, "helping them figure out what problems they have with their writing."

Despite what is often repeated in new teacher orientations that “the Writing Centre is not a free grammar editing service,” 36.4% of the interviewees consider it a place where you can encourage students to get their writing work “corrected.” 18.3% also consider the Writing Centre a place where “students can get *additional feedback* on writing” outside of the classroom, with a few teachers commented that it is especially for “shy students” to seek help one-on-one.

3) From a teacher’s perspective, how effective is the Writing Centre in playing the previously stated prescriptive role?

When asked to give a rating out of five in terms of the WC’s effectiveness in playing its intended role, with one being “ineffective” and five being “very effective,” the average rating from all 27 participants is three out of five. In other words, the ELI teachers on average believe the ELI Writing Centre to be 60% effective in servicing KUIS students with their writing. In addition, in this pool of 27 teachers, the perfect rating of five out of five was never given.

Before reluctantly giving a numerical rating of the effectiveness of the WC, many teachers once again stated that “it depends on the students,” and the consensus is that the current set-up of the KUIS WC benefits high-level students, or those who are motivated, more than lower-level students who genuinely need additional help. One other popular opinion is that for students to really benefit from the WC, “they need to understand the purpose of the Writing Centre, and know what to expect,” when visiting, which according to most participants, was not always the case.

To look closer into how teachers feel about the success or otherwise of the WC, it is helpful to summarize their comments by organizing them into perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current WC setup.

Strengths of the WC

The most recognized “strength” of the KUIS WC from the teachers’ perspective is that it is open and available to students throughout the day, and that “there is almost always a teacher there.”

The straightforward reservation system also received high praises from the interviewed teachers. They liked the fact that it is online, and that students can even make reservations on a mobile device using the designated SALC application.

In term of improving students’ writing, one teacher commented on the noticeable difference when a student’s writing had received feedback from the WC tutors.

It's so obvious when my students go to the writing center... when they go to the writing center (their writing is so good that) I have to stop and think ‘maybe this was plagiarized.’ And then I realized that they just got help from a teacher (at the Writing Centre)...

Teachers are particularly encouraged when the same writer returned to the writing center multiple times with the same piece of writing, making the WC as a part of their writing process. “They would have a different question each time, and over time you can

tell that the writing improved.” However, they also commented that cases like this were extremely rare.

Weaknesses of the WC

Teachers who gave a low rating commented that the WC is often underutilized. One teacher said, “Considering I don’t have students using it, can I give a (rating of) 0.5 (out of 5)?” Another teacher made a comment which summarized the popular opinion among those interviewed about how the WC was being utilized by the students: “Only two kinds of students use the Writing Centre: the super-motivated, and those sent by teachers,” and that “Students who really need the help don’t come.”

Out of all the perceived weaknesses mentioned by the interviewees, the 15-minute time constraint and the lack of flexibility to extend appointment time was the one frustration shared by most teachers. The time issue becomes very more acute when compounded with the perceived lack of clearly stated objectives or expectations. Students often visit the WC expecting a different kind of service from what the tutors were offering.

Students really just want to be told whatever is wrong, and they want to know *everything* that's wrong, which makes it really difficult when we only have 15 minutes. (Ideally) I try to make them check an answer first, and then give them the advice for it, to lead them into understanding what the mistake is so they can come up with the solution themselves, but usually that just takes time, and then a lot of times it means not getting through everything in an essay, or whatever work they've brought.

Another perceived weakness is the low usage rate of the WC by the students. The word “underutilized” was used frequently. “Most students don’t know about (what the Writing Center) or are afraid to use it.” One teacher commented that she so rarely gets appointments that often times she would “feel like the purpose of having teachers there is to look nice when visitors come around.”

The other major source of frustration is the perceived lack of training or prescribed standard procedure from the management team. When asked about the training they had received prior to starting their first tutoring session, many responded that there was no training for the WC.

At orientation, during my first year, I remember they explained what the writing center was, and then when we signed up for ELI duties, there was a handout that was sent out with the signup sheet that had a brief summary of each role, like, here's what the writing center does, here's what the practice center does, in one paragraph. That's pretty much what I got.

The majority of teachers also expressed confusion about what to do when they first started tutoring. Without a standard procedure or directive, most said they had to ask their peers for quick pointers.

One teacher shared, “I had to ask other people ‘what are we supposed to be doing?’ But I knew we had fifteen minutes. That’s all I knew.” Other teachers who had worked at the WC for a longer period of time mentioned that years ago, there was once an ELI teacher who worked as a “Writing Centre coordinator.” The coordinator had helped prepare the new

hires by giving a lunch time orientation at the beginning of their first semester.

One veteran teacher who had worked at the WC for a number of years mentioned an old promotional video made for KUIS students that is no longer available on the ELI-SALC website.

Someone sent an email asking us to have a look at the video. I did, and it told me everything I needed to know about the Writing Centre and the kind of help students can find there.

Other teachers used the previous training and experience from working at tutoring centers in other universities. One teacher shared that in her previous experience working in a university writing centre as a graduate student, they had to go through a 6-week training and orientation program prior to their first tutoring session. The program itself was a credit-bearing course, and every student was required to work through two textbooks: *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2010) and *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* (Bruce & Rafoth, 2009).

4) How do the teachers rate their overall experience of working at the WC? And how does the experience compare to previous experiences of working at similar WC setups elsewhere?

The average rating for overall experience working at the KUIS WC is 3.45 out of five, or 69%. When asked to rate the experience working at the WC, the majority of participants were reluctant to provide a clear rating, and the phrase “it depends” was often uttered. Most

teachers commented that “it depends on the students,” and that the current setup of the WC is evidently beneficial to students who are motivated and who takes ownership of their development. “These are kids who would come back again and again, and overtime you can really see their improvement.”

When comparing to other writing centers, the 15-minute appointment time constraint and the lack of flexibility of the KUIS Writing Centre was often the first item mentioned. Teachers shared that in their previous experience, writing appointment times were often 20 or 30 minutes, with the option for students to book two consecutive appointment at a time, allowing each session to be extended up to an hour.

One teacher commented on the lack of KUIS WC’s advertising in comparison to the tutoring center they had worked at previously: “Part of our job was to go into each freshmen writing classroom, and just advertise our service, letting them know this service was available...” so that university students who can benefit from the service know that WC exists and what it offers.

Most teachers who had worked previously at university writing centers commented that it is difficult to compare the experience. The tutoring programs these teachers participated in were often set up as a graduate course that came with extensive training and required reading on different tutoring theories and practices as well as frequent reflections and discussions among tutors to improve the service. Other teachers who had worked at other university-level writing centers said they were paid by the hour for their work similar tutoring centers. In other words, they had vested interest in their previous writing centre work, and that too can influence their attitude toward tutoring and the experience working at

the writing centre.

Discussion

Similar to the results from the 2015 study, when asked to give practical suggestions, the first item that most teachers shared was the length of appointment time. Many believed that 15 minutes is too short, and it limits the role of the writing center to a place for “quick-fix editing.” Many teachers, echoing the students from the previous study, believe it is difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish any goal in this short amount of time, and that appointments need to be at least 20 minute at the minimum for meaning conversation about writing to take place. They also suggest allowing students to sign up for more than one appointment at a time.

The 15-minute time constraint can also help explain the conflicting reports from this previous study on the KUIS WC and the current study. As mentioned above, teachers generally believe that the WC is underutilized, and that students do not sign up for appointments. However, as Morrison and Tu (2015) discovered, the usage rate of the center was recorded at an impressive 20% of the entire student body. This gap in data and perception is likely the result of time constraints and the lack of flexibility for students to sign up for more than one appointment a day. Limiting each tutoring session to 15 minutes opens up more appointment spaces than necessary, allowing many unoccupied appointment spaces on the reservation system.

As a response to the Morrison and Tu’s study (2015) on student perception, this study confirmed that WC teachers do hold different attitudes and varying degrees of willingness to provide detailed or exhaustive feedback. This contributing factor to the students’

perceived “unwillingness to give help” on the part of the teachers can stem from a variety of reasons, but what the teachers shared in the interviews about their previous tutoring experience provided a few clues. In other writing centers, tutors often earn academic credits or extra pay for their WC work in addition to an extensive training on best practices and an established system of accountability in place. From the teachers’ perspective, there might not be enough incentives for WC tutors to invest extra effort or energy during a busy school day in short 15-minute appointments working with students who often come for remedial reasons.

From the results, it is clear that teachers hold different ideas of what the KUIS Writing Centre is supposed to be, and their ideas of best WC tutoring practice are also vastly different. In other words, there are no clear guidelines about what is expected from the writing center tutors when they greet students for appointments. Teachers believe having clear definition of what the KUIS Writing Centre is, establishing best practice guidelines that suit the KUIS students’ unique needs, and defining the objectives and expectations of each appointment will help eliminate some of the frustrations WC users from either side of the table experienced. In addition, writing teachers at KUIS can better recommend the WC to students who can benefit from this tutoring service, tutors will be prepared to help students in their limited appointment time, and students can have a better idea of how to incorporate the WC in their own writing development.

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