

Peer Tutoring Beyond Borders

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Introduction

In WRS 301, Zuairia Shahrin had an a-ha moment while learning about cognitive biases. This moment resulted in Zuairia's now long-standing interest in writing across cultures, diversity, and equity, especially in terms of how cognitive biases might affect peer tutoring. Her paper addresses the struggles EAL (English as Additional Language) writers face and brings attention to peer-tutoring practices that emphasize inclusive, diverse and bias-free tutoring practices.

Keywords: cognitive bias, EAL writers, peer-tutoring, writing misconceptions



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Beyond Phrases and Borders: An Ink-Woven Community

*With each recipe handed down through kin,
Somewhere in the world, new family traditions begin.
Long-distance friends send texts so vast,
They connect hearts; a friendship that will last.
Each postcard that travels through oceans,
Reveals an international student's penned emotions.
Wrapped in ink, our sentiments are sown,
Writing is a community where no one is alone.*

*“Unique, intelligent, brave, and prudent”
These are the words I use to describe an international student.
As you navigate through these new corridors of uncertainty,
Try to discard the comments that may be dainty.
You don't have to be fluent in phrases to be fluent in ideas,
Because bias creeps into the academic world too, it appears.
Trust your writing, even when you think your English may stumble,
And look around you; your peer tutors won't let you fumble.
For us, accents and languages are not a divide,
ESL students will always have us as a mentor and a guide.
We believe in your ideas – they are not frail,
In this space, I assure you, each novice hand will prevail.
Wrapped in ink, our sentiments are sown,
Writing is a community where you will never be alone.*



Peer Tutoring Beyond Borders: A Foreword

Writing is a powerful tool that helps us in countless ways. From making grocery lists to publishing academic journals, it is a major part of our lives. It can foster connections among people, whether that is through simple text messages or longer letters. This united aspect of writing embraces a diverse array of people, including both domestic English speakers and EAL (English as an additional language) speakers, among others. Specifically in academia, writing serves to articulate ideas. However, some students exhibit disinterest when tasked with writing assignments, and in this final project, I aim to explore why this may be the case.

I believe some students develop an aversion to writing due to the grading system used in North American higher education institutions. Many courses with writing components prioritize grammatical fluency and correctness, potentially overshadowing the importance of ideas and concepts. EAL students may find this grading approach unfavourable as it diverts their attention away from the substantive development of ideas and arguments. To an extent, the restrictive nature of education systems contributes to this issue, which has led me to consider whether there is a way to alter this notion and inform EAL students about the broader benefits of writing beyond academic perimeters.

This semester, in my Writing Centre Practice class, a lecture about addressing biases prompted me to evaluate if EAL students were being tutored fairly at my university. I realized that I, along with other new peer tutors, might be unintentionally harbouring biases that could have a detrimental impact on a tutee's learning experience. As guides and mentors, peer tutors should work collaboratively with tutees to enrich their learning experience, without letting cognitive biases interfere. In this project, I aim to encourage and foster the creation of such non-judgmental, inclusive, and collaborative sessions. Following this foreword, I discuss an interview with an instructor in the English and Film Studies department at the University of Alberta, which includes common misconceptions and biases surrounding EAL students.³ The final segment is a diary entry through which I hope to encourage my fellow peer tutors to address their biases and create a healthy learning environment to support as many tutees as possible.

³ The person I interviewed and refer to throughout this project is an instructor in the English and Film Studies department at the University of Alberta who wishes to remain anonymous. Text in quotation marks represent the instructor's words.



Navigating Cognitive Biases in EAL Peer Tutoring: An Interview with a University of Alberta Instructor

During my interview with an instructor in the Writing and Film Studies department at the University of Alberta (my instructor for Writing Studies (WRS) 301), I learned about one of the most common misconceptions held by many educators and peer tutors. They often correlate poor writing skills to poor intelligence, which causes EAL students to be “dismissed as weak students when they are not,” my instructor maintained. Through her teaching practice, my instructor has encountered several EAL students who struggled with English but possessed “the most interesting and creative ideas.” Challenges arise from the difficult and time-consuming nature of acquiring a second or additional language, leaving EAL students feeling “stuck” in articulating their thoughts.” Tony Silva, in his journal article titled “On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers,” supports this concept by appreciating students for “their own views and agendas” (2). I agree with Silva because every student can have great ideas, but the problem arises when educators and peer tutors focus on how flawlessly these ideas are written or presented rather than appreciating the ideas for their substance and intrinsic value.

My instructor also explained that across many disciplines, “all EAL students get marked on is the sheer number of mistakes they make,” which highlights an inherent bias within the education system. She argues that EAL students become prey to low grades due to the emphasis placed on the lower-order concerns of writing within grade-oriented curricula. I agree with my instructor’s words because curricula—to an extent, at least—propels EAL students to produce written work that conforms to North American standards. This influence leads to the overshadowing of their ideas and their not “[getting] a chance to shine” academically. In the video “Writing Across Borders” from Oregon State University, a student named Deema Al-Qaissi also shares their opinion on the same, expressing that professors penalize them for deviating from the rules and conventions of English (*Writing Across Borders* 13:18–14:14).

While grammatical rules and conventions are important, they do not establish the ultimate authority in writing. Having read various Bengali novels, poems, and plays written by the renowned Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore, I know that writing transcends the confines of grammatical or structural correctness. Although many of Tagore’s works have been translated into English, they often lack the charm and quintessence found in the original Bengali versions; the authenticity is sacrificed to English semantics, grammatical intricacies, and structural regulations. I can imagine the same happening to EAL students, upon observing peer tutoring sessions at the University of Alberta Writing Services. The tutees encounter difficulties translating their ideas in a way that is understandable to the peer tutor. Also, the session is rendered ineffective if the peer tutor finds themselves

compelled to speculate on the tutee's ideas based on vague translations or online tools. Therefore, in my opinion, grammatical and structural rules are in place to bring organization to writing because they enhance readability and not because they determine the quality of the content. When we let conventions overshadow the greater essence of writing, we risk losing ideas to translation and language norms.

The North American culture, educational system, and curricula are very different from that of other nations. The system, as well as its educators and peer tutors, may not consistently acknowledge the cultural differences that can impact each tutee differently. For instance, the argumentation techniques prevalent in Asian countries like Japan strikingly differ from their North American counterparts, where the latter is characterized by a more direct, concise, and focused approach from the beginning (*Writing Across Borders* 11:05-11:56). In Japanese writing, it is the reader's responsibility to comprehend and interpret the writer's message, in contrast to English writing where clarity and explicitness are emphasized (*Writing Across Borders* 11:05-11:56).

Additionally, collectivist cultures like China also hold differing perceptions about plagiarism compared to the standards in North America. These cultures prioritize the sharing of ideas and may not strictly adhere to the concept of "ownership of words or thoughts." This cultural difference can be problematic for new EAL students unfamiliar with the plagiarism regulations in North American institutions. My instructor rightly pointed out that "we don't live in a world where readers of English are open to different structural patterns of writing," which holds in many cases as students are penalized for something they did not naturally learn in the first place. Hence, as peer tutors, we cannot assume that they know these rules or any other regulations that are strongly followed in North American universities and should be prepared to inform and guide them if necessary.

Even in terms of thinking, according to my instructor, Chinese students are different. China's education system prioritizes rote memorization over critical thinking. When superficial, knowledge-based questions are asked, they can quickly recall the answers, having memorized the content so diligently; however, they stumble when sharing personal opinions or thoughts about the subject. This difference in thinking also ties in with the previously discussed bias, wherein poor writing skills are wrongly associated with poor intelligence. As elucidated by Silva, "rhetorical differences may be manifestations of [the students'] cultural backgrounds and not cognitive or educational deficiencies" (2). Silva's argument cannot be denied, because EAL students come from different cultural backgrounds, and I believe that as peer tutors, we should appreciate their unique perspectives that have been shaped by their thoughts, ideas, and culture. Their thoughts may bring out breakthroughs in writing assignments, which can be used to their advantage.

Essentially, EAL students may very well think and write in completely different ways from North American students, but “different” does not mean “incorrect.” New peer tutors need to understand this distinction as it clarifies that a difference in thought or writing style does not correlate to poor intelligence.



Today, in the Pages of Zuairia’s Journal... How do I Debias Myself?

Dear Diary,

Childhood memories flood my thoughts today, asking me to reflect on peer tutoring. As I look back, I appreciate the unique circumstances of my upbringing: having to learn two languages—English and Bengali—simultaneously. So, I have always believed that I speak two first languages, regardless of my fluency in them. I am a Bangladeshi by nationality, but not by heart... perhaps due to the nomadic life I used to lead as a child? Culture considerably influences identity, but, if you ask me, I still don’t know who or what I am.

My parents dedicated themselves to ensuring that I had equal exposure to both languages, never favouring one over the other. This came with having a merchant navy engineering officer as a father, whose job required me to travel regularly and live in the UK and other European countries. On the other hand, my mother, a lawyer, almost treated me like one of her court cases and was very strict in ensuring that I spoke both languages well. After all, how else would I live in English-speaking countries if I didn’t know their language well? But somehow, despite hearing both languages equally, I was more inclined towards English. My mom still tells me how she was taken aback when I addressed her for the first time as “mum” instead of “ammu/ma.” Maybe “mum” is an easier word to pronounce, being monosyllabic... I don’t know! But I know that although she wasn’t necessarily disappointed, the Bengali mother in her yearned to be addressed traditionally. So, I often ask myself: does the choice of language matter if the feelings and thoughts are adequately expressed?

I attended several British international schools throughout my life and naturally became ingrained with the notion that grammatical fluency was the sole determinant of good writing. However, my perspective changed after enrolling in Writing Studies (WRS) 301 and speaking to my instructor. It became evident to me that my views had been heavily biased. Now as a peer tutor in training, I must address these biases so that I can approach each peer tutoring session with a fresh and unprejudiced perspective. If I let my biases interfere with the session, I will be defeating the whole purpose of peer tutoring, which according to Sanford is to guide tutees toward becoming more confident and independent writers (33).

I don’t want to be the kind of peer tutor who fixates on a tutee’s mistakes or over-emphasizes their weaknesses. That’s not who I am or who I want to be. Instead, I want to

encourage my tutees to not fear making mistakes (no matter what they are) and learn from them. Harris and Silva believe that “most readers will be interested in primarily what the writer has to say,” and since grammatical correctness is not as crucial as the larger concept, it becomes even more important to help tutees develop their ideas (3). I will follow their advice of “[distinguishing] between errors that interfere with the reader’s understanding of the text (global errors) and those that will not (local errors),” prioritizing the global errors (3). In doing so, I can encourage tutees to recognize the importance of their voice and ideas, which can’t be learned, rather than focusing on lower-order concerns, which can be learned. I think tutees need someone who can help them organize their thoughts and bring them to life... not someone who gives them yet another lecture on grammar and syntax!

On another note, hopefully, I will also be fostering an environment where tutees can view mistakes as learning opportunities and not be afraid of them.

I know that addressing my cognitive biases is not going to be easy, and it will be a harder task to ensure that these biases don’t interfere with the peer tutoring sessions. However, I plan on using small talk early in the semester to acquaint myself with my tutees and establish a rapport with them. My Writing Studies instructor mentioned that some tutors may find small talk uncomfortable; I know I shared that sentiment in the past. However, I now recognize its strategic value. By engaging in small talk, I hope to gain insights into the tutee’s cultural background, which will allow me to tailor sessions to their individual needs. This approach can also help me understand their preferred learning styles and potentially identify specific concerns, and visible or invisible disabilities, which will also help me incorporate resources that best support their requirements.

I think tutees require peer tutors who believe in their ideas and don’t discount them for being inappropriate or unrealistic; this is the kind of peer tutor I want to be. If peer tutors try to understand tutees as individuals, considering their cultural background, peer tutoring will become more inclusive. This collaboration will also help us guide our tutees to become more confident writers. Until then, I will be working towards becoming a non-judgmental peer tutor who encourages tutees to recognize their intellectual capabilities, regardless of their English proficiency, and also someone who emphasizes that they are valued members of a greater community that appreciates their art.

Signing off for now...!

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