

Writing Tutor Tips: Conference Interaction

When meeting a student in a conference to discuss a paper, both the student and tutor/instructor want the student to make progress. For the conference to be a success—for the *student* to progress—the student must play an active role in the conference. For most, this idea is far from controversial. However, finding the means by which to give students the opportunity to be a dynamic participant or even to prompt students to engage is the challenge. The following techniques are intended to help tutors/instructors bridge the gap between principle and application.

In order for the student to become an active participant, s/he must be given the opportunity to do so. For the tutor/instructor, the first step, then, is to do more listening and questioning than talking or instructing. The following suggestions promote student-talk and decrease tutor/instructor-talk:

1) Begin by asking the student why s/he has come to the conference or what s/he hopes to cover in the conference.

When describing the need for student-driven focus, David Nunan in *The Learner-Centred Curriculum* states that “what little [conference] time there is must therefore be used as effectively as possible to teach those aspects of the language which the learners themselves deem to be most urgently required, thus increasing surrender value and consequent student motivation” (3). Questions such as “What would you like to work on today” or “What problems are you having with your essay” help tutors/instructors—and perhaps even the students themselves—discover the “urgent” issues. In addition to providing appropriate focus for the session, as Cherry Campbell notes in *Teaching Second-Language Writing: Interacting with Text*, such an opportunity is empowering (65).

2) Ask questions that lead to extensive student response.

Questions may be categorized in many ways: yes-no vs. information, short-answer vs. open-ended, convergent vs. divergent. The latter types of questions often elicit the most useful responses in a conference. Jack Richards and Charles Lockhart, in *Reflective Teaching the Second Language Classrooms*, explain how convergent questions “do not usually require students to engage in higher-level thinking in order to come up with a response but often focus on the recall of previously presented material” in contrast to divergent questions which “promote diverse student response” and which “encourage students to provide their own information” (186-187). Consider the student feedback possible in answers to the following conference questions:

- Ex. Are you having difficulty with your theory?
vs.
What have you learned about theory in class?
Why do you think your theory is/n’t clear?

The first question does not provide tutor/instructor with a response to explore with the student. In contrast, the other questions prompt additional interaction and idea development.

3) Ask questions instead of expressing hypotheses.

Considering the issues above, consider the difference between these questions:

- At the end of the first paragraph, you write, “...” I’m not sure what you mean. I think that you mean “...” Is that right?
vs.
What do you mean here/at the end of the first paragraph?

When the tutor/instructor expresses her/his hypothesis, s/he may not be addressing what is actually on the paper and may even end up leading the student toward a particular idea. Despite the occasional use of guided questioning, tutors/instructors should generally strive to offer students the greatest opportunity possible to direct the flow of the tutoring session. As Campbell notes, a tutor/instructor’s response about the intended meaning of a particular passage of

student text may vary greatly depending upon the student's intended meaning (65). Therefore, establishing that meaning must take priority.

It is also possible to ask questions which give alternatives when analyzing the text, such as "When you write '...', do you mean 'A', 'B' or something else?" Such questions clearly credit the student with ownership of the paper and prevent the tutor/instructor from falling prey to what Campbell describes as the "desire to take over the paper" (65).

4) Give the writer time to think.

During conferences, especially those with non-native speakers of English, students have a lot to think about. In addition to the ideas the student would like to present in an essay, s/he is taking language into account. The extent to which a student's first language(s) is influencing her/his efforts in the target language may not be clear to the tutor. During the conference, then, as the tutor/instructor questions the student, the student may need to:

- 1) hear and perhaps even translate the question,
- 2) understand the meaning of the question,
- 3) consider the answer to the question,
- 4) compose a response, and
- 5) respond.

Such a process takes time. Consider giving the student "wait time" before:

- 1) checking to see if the student understood the question,
- 2) rephrasing the question, or
- 3) asking a different question.

While the latter may be intended to help the student and may eventually serve as useful tools, the initial question may suffice if the student is given the opportunity to answer.

5) Consider the conference as an opportunity for revision, not correction.

Students may come to a conference with expectations of leaving with a perfect paper. However, the tutor/instructor realizes that this expectation is unrealistic. Similar to what Nunan describes in the classroom, "given the constraints that exist in most learning contexts, it is impossible to teach learners everything they need to know" (2). The conference session is an opportunity for the student to explore the revisions the students can later make on their own. Therefore, particularly in the initial stages of conferencing, the focus is on idea development, not correction.

When feedback about errors is needed, consider the guidelines given in the reference guidelines *Writing Tutor Tips: Patterns of Error* (currently under development).

Bibliography

- Campbell, Cherry. *Teaching Second-Language Writing: Interacting with Text*. Pacific Grove, CA: Heinle & Heinle, 1998.
- Nunan, David. *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. Cambridge: CUP, 1988.
- Richards, Jack C. and Charles Lockhart. *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: CUP, 1996.