Review

Expanding Horizons: A Second Language Acquisition Approach to Writing Center Practice

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Rafoth, Ben. *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2015. Print. 157 pages.

In a somewhat disheartened but clear-eyed response to the widespread perception of Writing Centers as sites of remediation, as "some sort of skills center, a fix-it shop" (435), Stephen North, in his groundbreaking 1984 *College English* article "The Idea of a Writing Center," plugged into the very pulse of writing center activity and concluded that they are places "whose primary responsibility, whose only reason for being, is to talk to writers" (436). He followed up this bold claim with a reasoned call for "describing this talk: what characterizes it, what effects it has, how it can be enhanced" (434). Today, a rapid rise in the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students entering colleges and universities indicates a parallel increase in services designed to meet their academic needs (Hussar and Bailey 23). But these demographic shifts also tell us that given the vast variation in students' histories, experiences, and educational needs, this notion of talk as the central function of the center can neither be simple nor uncontroversial. The unplanned, unrehearsed nature of writing center interactions raises obvious questions: How should talk with multilingual students proceed? Within what theoretical framework should this talk be grounded? What tools and strategies do tutors need to become expert talkers?

Ben Rafoth's latest book, *Multilingual Students and Writing Centers*, attempts to answer these questions and more by taking a close look at the multilingual realities and constraints facing writing center tutors in the US and abroad. More significantly, it fills what appears to be a critical

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gap in writing center practices with "theory and research from the field of second-language acquisition, particularly as it relates to one-on-one inter-action, academic discourse, and providing corrective feedback" (3). The book represents a natural progression from Rafoth's widely-read *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* (Bruce and Rafoth), an edited volume which dealt with the topic of second language writers in writing centers from a broader perspective and aimed to serve as an all-encompassing handbook for tutors working with students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and literacy backgrounds. One detects a justifiable transition from the expansive section on ESL tutoring sessions in *ESL Writers* to the singular focus on tutor training and preparation by means of the explicit use of second language acquisition concepts and terminology that is evident in *Multilingual Students*. Yet the exigency behind the book is perhaps best understood in the context of the larger, ongoing conversation on corrective feedback and Dana R. Ferris's observation that "both SLA and L2 writing studies could collaborate to more effectively bridge the gap that currently exists between research and practice" (182). As distinguished university professor and director of the writing center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Rafoth takes this imperative seriously and demonstrates that writing center interactions which are informed by second language acquisition approaches culled from the domain of applied linguistics have the potential to transform tutor education and practice.

In chapter one, "The Changing Faces of Writing Centers," Rafoth tries to accomplish several, related goals. In order to highlight the growing opportunities in education and literacy worldwide, the author presents an impressive array of writing centers that have sprung up in countries such as Turkey, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany. What these snapshots tell us is not only how writing center culture is rapidly spreading in international venues, but also how "these structures have arisen in response to the internationalization of English-language teaching, especially for academic and professional purposes" (23). To illustrate what internationalization—a critical element of writing center experience today—entails, Rafoth cites L2 writing sources that help establish the complex language and literacy background of multilingual writers in US settings and lays out the challenges facing monolingual tutors (33).

Preparing tutors, both multilingual and native English speakers, to be agents of successful exchanges is a daunting task, but it can be quite rewarding if this preparation is built upon a foundation informed by the kinds of approaches offered in chapter two, "Learning from Interactions." Drawing upon concepts such as *idiomaticity*, *native-speaker privilege*, and *emicity*, Rafoth demonstrates how complex interactions can be handled

effectively if tutors are not just aware of how these concepts are tied to tutor and student expectations but flexible in adapting them. There is also a prolonged emphasis on specific ways that tutors can ensure that writing center conversations are effective by valuing "negotiated interaction," careful listening, and a "full range of conversational pragmatics" (52) as building blocks for sessions with all types of second language learners. Two of the concepts, *miscommunication* and *incomplete understanding,* highlight the significance of what are generally understood to be negative experiences but can be useful in tackling, if not resolving, knotty language issues, as the example from Jennifer Ritter's 2002 dissertation shows. At the heart of this chapter is a call for serious tutor training and preparation that provides novice tutors with the background knowledge required to work with beginner as well as advanced level L2 learners. Some of the ways tutor education can be achieved, Rafoth suggests, is by promoting a shared vocabulary, educating tutors on the differences between first and second language acquisition (53) and by developing centers where tutors undergo a "rigorous preparation course, [are] observed, and given regular feedback on their sessions" (57). Here as well as in other chapters, Rafoth reiterates the critical role of writing center directors in tutor development but with scant reference to accompanying strategies, even in brief form, for operationalizing tutor education.

Chapter three, "Academic Writing," starts out by situating the work of tutors within the challenging context of instruction that occurs in various disciplines and in academia at large. Multilingual students and professionals engaging in academic discourse need guidance in understanding that writing is not only a discipline-based, genre-specific activity but also that it requires attention to and development of particular lexical elements. Further, given the vast range of expectations embedded in writing assignments across disciplines and the inevitable variations and inconsistencies in instruction that come with it, tutors need to develop a broad awareness of the conventions of academic discourse, if not disciplinary peculiarities. Since none of this can come easily for peer tutors, Rafoth suggests that tutors orient L2 writers to the "performance aspect of writing" (88) and help them develop strategies for observing and imitating conventions that would then ease their entry into the unfamiliar territory of academic writing.

In the sections that follow in chapter three, there is an extended emphasis on constructs and concepts that are designed to assist tutors approach the work of multilingual writers with a deeper awareness of the lexical, rhetorical, and strategic choices they can offer in the session. Of particular importance are the concepts of *reformulation* and *exemplification* which are "code glosses" or "metatext markers" (91). Rafoth rightly notes that as these

terms point to writing features directly related to disciplinary conventions, they enable tutors to "link abstract notions like *writing for the discipline*, *sense of audience*, and *explains clearly* to discoursal features" (92; emphasis original) in student writing that can be identified and negotiated interactively. Other language-based tutoring strategies that focus on "lexical density," vocabulary, and use of translation are useful elements of this chapter, even though there are few examples that illustrate the challenges of putting these strategies into practice.

With the ongoing conversation of the efficacy of grammar instruction (Truscott; Ferris; Matsuda) hovering in the background, in chapter four, "Corrective Feedback," Rafoth positions writing center pedagogy squarely at the center of the controversy by declaring that "ignoring or contravening writers' requests for feedback on their errors has opened writing centers to criticism for failing to take seriously multilingual writers' requests for help with language and grammar" (110). While the efficacy of grammar instruction and its linkage to improved writing is questionable, second language learners undoubtedly rely on instructors and tutors for guidance and feedback on language errors. So what kind of expertise should tutors bring to the demands of the intense language-based interactions with this population? Rafoth's emphasis on "modified conversational strategies" (112) when dealing with multilingual students' writing encapsulates an approach to error correction that directly addresses students' concern with grammatical correctness. The chapter succeeds in naming tutoring strategies that replace intuitive responses to error with conscious moves such as noticing and recasting, providing tutors with specific vocabulary for dealing with language errors. The concept of *noticing* is presented as "a cognitive function that requires some type of activation" (114), and when used in conjunction with recasting—tutor articulation of the correct form of an error—these interactive approaches to language and error feedback can help second language students become active agents who have some control over their language learning experience. While these concrete strategies for addressing error correction are helpful additions to the tutoring toolkit, what resonates most in this chapter for writing center tutors and directors alike are the limitations of any of these approaches and the need for meta-discourse on the efficacy of corrective feedback—its benefits and drawbacks—given the likely gap in tutors' knowledge of language acquisition and language use and the varied needs of multilingual learners.

The final chapter of the book reemphasizes the challenges posed by the increasingly diverse student populations attending writing centers and the critical need for directors and tutors to be adequately informed and trained as practitioners in the field of writing center pedagogy. Among several key

suggestions, and one worthy of consideration by administrators, is the call for the recruitment of more language-conscious tutors who are either themselves linguistically diverse or have experiences in language teaching and learning (123). Of further significance, and perhaps one that reflects a distinct departure from traditional tutoring norms for non-native as well as native speakers, is what Rafoth calls an "intentionally instructive" (126) approach to talk that is tied to "explicit or direct" (131) tutoring practices. Simply stated, Rafoth's claim here is that, given the exigencies of working with multilingual students, direct, hands-on interaction can be far more effective if tutors are knowledgeable about and confident in engaging with the new concepts and resources that this book makes available to them.

Voices of tutors and vignettes of tutor-student interactions are bright spots in the book that provide glimpses of how sessions with multilingual students, while often messy and unpredictable, are nevertheless positive experiences. More importantly, though, they reveal just how difficult it is to determine the extent to which a session has been successful and the conditions that contribute to that success. As sample snapshots, these vignettes make useful discussion starters in tutor-training workshops or staff meetings. Throughout the book, Rafoth reiterates the role of directors as key agents responsible for guiding and educating tutors, and even though there is little substantial discussion of practical training methods, these reiterations highlight the critical role of writing center directors in tutor success. If tutors "must possess a base of knowledge" (131) specific to multilingual learners that they need to continuously build upon, directors must find ways to provide ongoing staff development opportunities that solidify this base. Finally, although the book's pragmatic, language-based approaches to tutoring can be easily adapted to current practice, they are presented primarily as heuristics, not solutions, a vital point that directors would do well to keep in mind for tutor training events. In this sense, there is no denying that Rafoth's book is targeted not just at writing center tutors but directors as well, and the latter will be quite heartened by the ongoing reference to their function as educators who are invited to devise innovative ways of engaging the book's strategies for tutor development and training, an essential aspect of writing center activity.

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