

**THE USE OF A WRITING CENTER BY NON-NATIVE ACADEMIC WRITERS: A CASE  
STUDY IN TAIWAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the study is to examine the recent implementation of a writing center in an English-as-a-foreign- language context in Taiwan to facilitate students' academic writing. This study employed a qualitative multiple case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of EFL students and writing consultants on writing consultation. The findings revealed that the students and writing consultants have different perceptions of the writing center in terms of the focus of the consultation and the approach to assist students with their writing. Moreover, the level of the disciplinary knowledge of the writing consultants, the role of the academic advisors of the students, and the language proficiency of the EFL students are all important factors that influence the implementation of the task of the writing center. The findings suggested that localization and negotiation need to be carried out when importing the writing center system into an EFL community.

Keywords: academic writing; second language writing; writing center; writing consultation; writing instruction

**INTRODUCTION**

Writing consultation, an approach to facilitate writing instruction, has been widely integrated into higher educational institutions in western countries as complementary learning support since the 1930s (Murphy & Law, 1995). It aims to enhance students' writing skills by providing a chance for one-to-one conferencing between a tutee and a writing consultant. Unlike a classroom setting where a course instructor faces a group of students, writing consultation is an individualized tutorial that focuses on an individual student's unique writing problems (Williams &

Severino, 2004). One-to-one writing consultation encourages students to participate actively in negotiating with the consultant for improvement in general writing skills or for specific changes to be made in their written texts (Woodward-Kron, 2007). The individualized focus in a writing center allows for learner-adapted scaffolding, guiding students toward better writing (Murray, Thow, Moore, & Murphy, 2008).

A current and widely accepted writing center practice emphasizes collaboration between a writing consultant and a writer. Writing consultants are trained to help students become better writers by asking questions or giving advice on students' writing instead of directly editing their papers (Harris, 1992; Thonus, 1999). Their work involves listening to what the student says about his/her writing problems, scaffolding the student's thinking, and guiding the student to discover his/her own solutions to each problem. Most guidelines for writing consultants stress the importance of using a non-directive approach in assisting writers to find their own answers (Harris, 1982; Meyer & Smith, 1987). It is hoped that through this interaction, students can receive individualized guidance and feedback on their writing and at the same time foster ownership of their own writing.

As the writing center was first established in universities in the United States, its theory and consultation techniques were originally developed for the needs of native English-speaking (NES) writers. When the writing center serves a different population, the same notion and practice may need to be re-evaluated and modified. In the early 1990s, an increasing number of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) writers visited writing centers for assistance with academic writing. Research into this trend has found that the writing problems of ESL students involve their unfamiliarity with the English rhetorical structure, culture, and language (Harris & Silva, 1993; Powers, 1993; Severino, 1993). The types of assistance that they need appear to be different from those of NES writers. For example, linguistic difficulties have been found to be the main reason that ESL writers go to a writing center (Bruce & Rafoth, 2004). ESL students' advisors usually send them to the writing center to have their grammatical errors corrected (Woodward-Kron, 2007). Writing consultants sometimes prioritize lower-level concerns such as grammar, word choice, and punctuation for ESL writers in order to clarify meaning (Blau & Hall, 2002). The techniques and styles of working with ESL writers are therefore different from those of working with NES writers and sometimes may conflict with the original principle

followed in founding of writing centers, which is to promote the discussion of writing rather than directly correcting grammatical errors (Williams & Severino, 2004).

When the approaches of teaching writing skills that have emerged from English-dominant countries are introduced in an EFL context, they often undergo several modifications to accommodate the needs specific to the local context. Leki (2001) discusses several challenges that writing teachers in non-English-dominant countries may face as they adopt approaches developed in English-dominant contexts. The challenges include large-size classes, lack of teacher training in L2 writing, and differences in the educational backgrounds of the students. Previous research has reported that writing teachers in non-English-dominant countries adopt western writing approaches by making necessary adjustments to accommodate their context. For instance, while implementing the process approach in large-size classes, Boughey (1997) carried out group work to teach academic writing. Taking into account the results of a previous study that Chinese students prefer written comments from peers (Arndt, 1993), Li (1994) used written annotations to replace oral feedback to accommodate L2 students' needs when she adopted the process writing approach in a Hong Kong classroom.

In recent years, writing centers have received growing attention not only in English-speaking countries but also in countries such as Taiwan where English is a foreign language. However, the teaching of writing in an EFL context differs from that in an English-dominant country in many ways. Regarding EFL writing in Taiwan, most students start learning to write in English in secondary school and the focus is on essay writing for test-preparation purposes, with little class time spent on writing as a process or on higher-order concerns (e.g., content and organization). At the college level, especially in non-language fields of study, only a few students have the chance to take English writing courses. Yet, even with little exposure to writing instruction, many graduate students, especially doctoral students, are required to publish in international journals (usually written in English) before they can claim their degree. In other words, the need for writing for publication is prevalent in Taiwan and students are expected to produce high quality writing in English, despite lacking adequate preparation and instruction. Therefore, a writing center that aims to help students with English writing is considered to be a promising solution to the dilemma and has received growing interest in universities in recent years.

However, writing centers in an EFL context are still in the embryonic stage and very few, if any, studies report on the implementation and experience of writing consultation with EFL writers. Understanding is limited to the differences in terms of the type of help needed by writers in EFL contexts, the varying effects of the use of native English-speaking (NES) and non-native English-speaking (NNES) consultants in writing consultation, the effects of variations in consultation style on EFL writers, and the effects of varied disciplinary knowledge on the effectiveness of writing consultation. This paper aims to offer a preliminary report on writing consultation with EFL writers. Specific research questions are addressed as follows:

1. Are there differences between EFL students' and writing consultants' perceptions of the writing center in terms of the focus of the consultation and the approach to assist students with their writing?
2. What is the perceived role of the consultant in the writing center?
3. How do EFL students handle comments given by consultants?
4. What are the factors influencing EFL students' choice of NES/NNES writing consultants?

## **METHOD**

### **Setting**

The writing center in the study was set up under the Language Teaching and Research Center in a research-oriented university in Taiwan. The writing center is staffed with eight full-time lecturers (three native English speakers and five non-native English speakers). A total of 24 hours of writing consultation sessions are offered per week in the center. Regarding the language used in consultation, English is the dominant language in communication for the NES consultants and Chinese is used most of the time by the NNES consultants.

The writing center service is open to all of the students on the campus. Students who are interested in receiving writing help have to make reservations with the center one week in advance. They can choose among the eight consultants for help. Each writing session runs for 50 minutes. The writing session is a one-to-one consultation. Students are

required to bring a writing sample. Due to the limited number of available sessions and the long line of students on the waiting list, the student who brings a writing sample has the priority to sign up for a writing consultation session over those who do not have any writing samples. For subsequent visits, students are encouraged to bring a revised version based on the recommendations made during the previous consultation. Most of the students participating in the writing center are Chinese-speaking EFL learners in upper-level undergraduate or graduate programs. Due to the high demand for writing help, each student is limited to booking 10 sessions per semester.

As the concept of the writing center is commonly defined as a skills center, not a fix-it shop (Staben & Nordhaus, 2004), the aim is to produce better writers, not simply better writing. The writing center in question has a policy against consultants acting as proofreaders. The policy is explicitly specified in the regulations and promotional brochure of the center.

#### Background of Students Requesting Writing Consultation

For one semester (18 weeks) in Fall 2008, the total number of students receiving assistance in writing consultation sessions was 329. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of students' pursued degrees and fields of study. As can be seen from Table 1, 82% of the students visiting the writing center were graduate students and 18% were undergraduate students.

Table 1. Distribution of the number of students in each field

Fields of study	Graduate	Under-graduate	Total
1. College of Electrical and Computer Engineering	79	11	90 (27%)
2. College of Computer Science	51	10	61 (18%)
3. College of Management	49	6	55 (17%)
4. College of Humanity and Social Science	50	1	51 (16%)
5. College of Science	10	22	32 (10%)

Table 1. Distribution of the number of students in each field (continued)

Fields of study	Graduate	Under-graduate	Total
6. College of Biological Science and Technology	18	2	20 (6%)
7. College of Engineering	13	4	17 (5%)
8. College of Hakka Studies	—	3	3 (1%)
Total	270 (82%)	59 (18%)	329

#### Types of Writing Brought to the Writing Center

Regarding types of writing presented for writing help, Table 2 shows the percentage of different writing purposes. Overall, the most common types of writing are test preparation (e.g., TOEFL and GRE), followed by general writing practice and journal manuscript.

Table 2. Percentage of types of writing brought to the writing center

Types of writing	Total (%)
Test preparation	31.18
General writing practice	17.56
Journal manuscript	16.13
Thesis/dissertation	10.75
Homework assignment	8.60
Statement of purpose	5.38
Resume	4.30
Other	5.73

#### Research design

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of students' and faculty consultants' perspectives on writing consultation (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). It aims to provide an in-depth illustration of the individual cases and identify significant trends among them. The analysis benefited greatly from the triangulation of multiple perspectives and viewpoints—those of the participating students and the writing consultants. These differing

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data sources and viewpoints form the basis of the study through a documentation of the participants' thoughts and feelings about writing consultations in an EFL setting. The data analysis was primarily inductive. Tentative categories and salient themes emerged from multiple reviews of the interview transcripts, survey results, and field notes.

**Interviews**

The study involved three student participants and four faculty consultants in the writing center (See Table 3 and Table 4). The student participants were selected on the basis of how many times they visited the writing center and their willingness to take part in the study. Frequent visitors were chosen due to their extensive experience with the writing consultation process which implies a higher familiarity with the writing center service and therefore more in-depth reflection on their experience. The faculty consultants were selected on the basis of obtaining a balance between NES and NNES backgrounds, teaching experience, and variation in previous educational background. All of the faculty consultants involved in the writing center hold a Master's degree. Pseudonyms were used in the study to avoid revealing students' and consultants' background.

Table 3. Students participating in the study

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Session of studies</b>	<b>Language proficiency</b>	<b>Number of visits</b>
Student 1 (S1)	M	TESOL	4th semester MA	TOEFL iBT 107	7
Student 2 (S2)	F	TESOL	6th semester MA	N/A	4
Student 3 (S3)	M	Electronic Engineering	4th semester MA	N/A	6

Table 4. Faculty consultants participating in the study

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Language background</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Years of teaching</b>
Teacher 1 (T1)	F	Native English speaker	TESOL	10.0
Teacher 2 (T2)	M	Native English speaker	Engineering	1.0
Teacher 3 (T3)	F	Bilingual in Chinese and English	TESOL	1.5
Teacher 4 (T4)	F	Near native in English with 4 years' residence in English-speaking countries	Translation	2.5

The interviews lasted between 50 and 80 minutes for each of the three students and four consultants, totaling around eight hours of interview data, which was audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim to allow in-depth investigation of the data. The language medium of the interviews for the NNEST was Chinese and that for the NES was English. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in a more open-ended style (Atkinson, 1998; Gubrium & Holstein, 1995) to maximize opportunities for broader insight into their experience of the consultation sessions. Follow-up interviews were conducted to provide a fuller view of the participants' perceptions and to allow for an expansion of preliminary insights.

The raw data from the eight interview transcripts was reduced by summarizing data pertaining to the research questions and other emerging issues. Next, codes were assigned to the interview transcripts summaries. Once a theme was identified, all data pertaining to it from the different sources was pooled and further analyzed to identify evidence that might support or challenge a particular line of argument.

## RESULTS

**Differences between EFL Students' and Writing Consultants' Perceptions of the Focus of the Consultation and the Approach to Assist Students with Their Writing**

*Form vs. content*

Table 5 shows the distribution of students' perception of the areas in which they needed help in the writing center. As can be seen from Table 5, grammar is reported to be the area most addressed during the consultation session, followed by content development, and vocabulary.

Table 5. Distribution of help perceived by the students

Category	Total	Percentage
<b>Grammar</b>		<b>43.48</b>
Grammar in general	77	37.20
Parallel structure	1	0.48
Article	4	1.93
Verb tense	6	2.90
Conditional sentence	1	0.48
Punctuation	1	0.48
<b>Content</b>		<b>33.82</b>
Organization	33	15.94
Idea development	16	7.73
Logical thinking	8	3.86
Fluency (coherence)	12	5.80
Topic sentence	1	0.48
<b>Vocabulary</b>		<b>14.01</b>
Word choice	26	12.56
Collocation	2	0.97
Spelling	1	0.48
<b>Overall</b>		<b>7.25</b>
Identifying weaknesses in the article	6	2.90
Enhancing writing skills	8	3.86
Editing	1	0.48
<b>Other</b>		<b>1.45</b>
Attitude toward teaching and learning	1	0.48
Writing resources or tool	2	0.97

The results of the interviews corroborate the findings shown in Table 5—the areas in which the students were most found to require

help were related to grammatical accuracy or fluency. As one student stated

I'd like the writing consultant to see if there's any grammatical problem in my draft. And if the sentence isn't beautiful enough, the consultant can help me with the revision, so that the sentence can be more native-like, rather than in weird Chinglish (S2).

The EFL students seem to prioritize grammar and accuracy in the writing consultation. They expect the writing consultants to identify and correct their grammatical errors and further polish their English so that they can sound more native-like.

From the consultants' point of view, however, students not only need help with grammar correction but also assistance with other higher-order issues such as rhetorical differences between Chinese and English, audience awareness, and logical organization. As mentioned earlier, most students came to the writing center with little prior training in English writing. They were thus not aware of these issues as pointed out by the consultant below:

I see a kind of light go on when I talk about the content or the organization. For example, this week, a student was doing GRE preparation, and she was just given a topic. She was supposed to agree or disagree with it, and she tended to choose a point of view, support it really well, and then at the end of the paper, added a short paragraph about the other side of the issue. And it was her assumption that she needed to look at both sides of the issue, or the essay wasn't complete, and so she wasn't really aware of the goals of the judges of the GRE test about Western ideas of being direct and getting to the point (T1).

It's my impression that it's easy to be prescriptive, to be rule-oriented, and it's traditional in Taiwan to talk about rules. So I think they have sort of been guided to focus on that as their weakness and they haven't been really taught to be aware of bigger issues like who are the readers of your paper, what do they want to know, are you presenting your ideas in a correct order, things like this (T1).

The student who was writing in preparation to take the GRE may have visited the writing center to have her grammar corrected only without being aware that her writing had other content and organization issues. In cases like this, the writing consultant seems to play the role of a writing instructor who takes on the job of teaching students the higher-order issues of English writing given that many EFL students who visited the writing center did not take any writing courses.

*Directive vs. non-directive approaches*

In terms of the focus of the consultation, students indicated that they preferred to receive more directive suggestions because they have been educated in such a way since childhood. For this reason, students believe that a directive teaching approach would yield more positive learning outcomes. In addition, students expressed an inability and lack of motivation to discover their writing problems if a non-directive approach was adopted. Students noted,

I prefer the consultant directly telling me what to do because that's how I've been educated since childhood. If I'm asked to discover my own problem, I may fail to get it. Even when later, the consultant shows me how to do it, I may not be motivated enough to spend the time searching for an answer or doing the revision. Besides, it's not easy for me to get a booking for a consultation visit, and if it's all about searching and exploring on one's own, then the consultation is a waste of time for me and it does not help at all (S3)!

I may be a more passive student who prefers explicit comments. If the comments and suggestions are written down, I will get a stronger impression and remember things better. If the consultant just tells me my error types and expects me to self-correct the errors, I am afraid that I am not motivated enough to do any checking (S3).

Actually it is rather difficult for us to come up with our own writing problems because we're not really sure about what problems we have. I hope that the consultant can serve as an outsider and point out the problems for us (S2).

In line with previous studies that advocate a possibly more directive approach for L2 writers (Blau & Hall, 2002; Thonus, 1999, 2002), the EFL students in the present study voiced the same need. EFL students do not welcome the non-directive approach under which they need to identify their own writing problems and find out the answers. Perhaps more importantly, they do not know *how* to do so since they have never been educated within such a teaching approach.

The consultants who did adopt the original writing center approach thus found it difficult to involve students in discussions on writing. The consultants indicated that most students lacked the ability to talk about writing or to show an understanding of the responsibilities that they needed to take in the creation of a revision during the consultation session. Specifically, many students felt unable to ask specific questions about the issues that they encountered in the writing process or articulate their needs during the consultation session. As two of the consultants put it,

A lot of them just placed their writing in front of me without any sort of explanation as to what their goals were. So I think it would be the easiest to assume that their expectation is that we should go through it with them line by line to proofread their English (T1).

When most of the students come, they come with a piece of writing, and very few questions, and they always say, "How can I improve my writing?" They ask very generic questions, to be honest. I guess possibly a lot of the students come here because they are told to go there. I don't know whether they think about the request. ... They see it as, I've got this, you look at this, tell me what's wrong with that (T2).

The writing consultants expected students to raise some specific questions about their own writing. However, most EFL students were not capable of doing this.

#### **Perceptions of the Role of the Writing Consultant**

*Students' perceptions: Consultants as language experts*

EFL students in this study, especially graduate students working on their thesis or articles for publication, considered writing consultants to be English language experts who can help them with linguistic issues such as grammar and vocabulary. Students made a clear distinction between language and content. They generally trusted the writing consultants' comments on language; however, for issues involved disciplinary knowledge, students tended to be more "reserved about taking the suggestion" due to the consultants' lack of familiarity with the content knowledge. As one student put it,

I think the consultation is helpful in the linguistic part of writing. Since the consultant does not have enough background knowledge of our field of study, it is more beneficial to just focus on grammar or word usage (S2).

Basically, native speakers' opinions about collocation use were trustworthy to me. I'd also take in the grammatical rules they provided because they showed me how to apply the rules. But if it is about a term which is jargon specific to our research field, I will be more reserved about taking the suggestion. It is because the consultant does not know the meaning of the term and asks me for my explanation. Sometimes, after my explanation, the consultant tells me that it is still awkward to use the term in the way I do. Then, I will tell the consultant that I'd seen it somewhere in a journal article and I am very sure about it. I will normally insist on using the term in my own way and still have it in my paper (S2).

For issues such as content and organization, students indicated that they could learn on their own or rely on their advisor to provide content-specific comments. Writing consultants, in students' view, free their advisors from grammar checking so the advisors can focus on the content alone. As one student put it,

I think the consultation can help me a lot with grammar correction. For content and organization, I think I can handle that myself after some practice and get the feeling about how to write. Grammar just

takes a lot more practice for me (S1).

I think it is a good idea to make an appointment with a writing consultant before I give my manuscript to my advisor. And if I have the consultant look at my paper first, then my advisor won't have to worry about my grammatical or linguistic problems and only has to concentrate on the content (S1).

In short, the EFL students distinguish form from content when they seek help with their writing. They consider writing consultants as language experts who can only help them with lower-level issues (e.g., grammar and vocabulary) in writing. They leave higher-level issues (e.g., content and organization) for their academic advisor who possesses a disciplinary knowledge of the writing.

*Consultants' perceptions: Consultants as teachers, coaches, and editors*

The consultants perceived their roles differently. As previously mentioned, the consultants were lecturers in the university. Their role as teachers seems to shape how they perceive themselves as writing consultants. As one consultant put it:

For me, I think it should be teaching them how to improve their English writing, not to help them succeed in writing the paper. But I mean teach them how to write so they can use it as a future skill. That's what I think it should be, not to help them correct their thesis so they can graduate (T2).

On the other hand, some consultants consider themselves as having multiple roles, ranging on a continuum from that of an editor to a coach. While being aware of their role as teachers in university where their job is to offer instruction and guide students' learning, the consultants also considered themselves to be working as editors, perhaps due to the demand for grammar correction by the students. One consultant noted,

My role of consultant is on a continuum between being a coach and an editor and I lean more toward the coach because there is more focus on instruction, guidance, communication, and discussion (T4).

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In recognizing the nature of writing consultation as being based on voluntary participation on the part of the students, one consultant perceived herself as having multiple roles—as an editor, a tutor, or even a collaborator. In the writing center, students voluntarily sign up for writing consultation sessions when they need it. Different from the position of a teacher, the consultants do not have control over whether the student will schedule a follow-up session, nor do they have detailed information about each student's background. In cases like these, the consultant can only focus on the text that the student brings to the session instead of tracking their learning progress. Therefore, the consultant considered herself working as an editor in some sense.

I am between a tutor and an editor, or even a collaborator. To me, a tutor offers long-term help and arranges follow-up consultation, whereas an editor tends to work on a written text and is totally unaware of the student's background and writing process. Seems like we consultants are in between a tutor and an editor (T3).

In sum, consultants differ quite widely in terms of their perceptions of their role as a consultant. Some consider themselves as a teacher who scaffolds students to become a better writer, whereas others consider their roles falling somewhere between a coach (tutor) and an editor.

#### **EFL Students' Responses to the Comments from Writing Consultants**

The support offered by the writing consultants in the writing center seems to shape students' writing process and motivation. With comments from writing consultants, students become more willing to write and more eager to incorporate newly learned knowledge into their writing. As one student put it,

I am better motivated if there is someone reading my draft. Sometimes I get stuck in writing and I don't feel like doing it anymore. If there is someone proofreading my draft, I become more willing to try some newly acquired words in writing (S2).

In addition, comments from writing consultants can enhance students' awareness of their writing problems. The interaction with a writing consultant also allows students to learn strategies which can help them to

identify their writing problems. As the students commented,

I usually wrote run-on sentences and lost the focus. She [the consultant] would show it. She read the sentence out and told me that she could hardly breathe because the sentences are so long. She showed me ways that helped me out in writing. For example, she suggested that I should read aloud my draft when I finished writing. If I could not breathe while I was reading the draft, then I had to break it down (S2).

After the consultation, I would review the comments I received and see what was wrong in my draft. Next time, I will pay extra attention to the parts where I'd made a mistake before (S3).

As mentioned earlier, students working on their thesis or journal papers tend to expect writing consultants to focus on grammar or sentence-level issues, whereas their academic advisor is the one to consult on content and logical development. Nevertheless, the results of the interviews still show an instance of conflict between a consultant and an advisor. As a student remarked,

My advisor [NNES professor] told me not to overuse the article 'the' because I always put a definite article before a noun. But her [the NES consultant] comments were different. She asked me to put 'the' before some nouns. This really confused me (S1).

As the NES consultant recalled the experience with the above-mentioned case, she commented,

It was a very complicated point to explain clearly so that I felt that although I knew I was right, my explanation was not clear to the student and was not necessarily useful to the student. ...I don't think the explanation is going to be that beneficial to the student, and I think it would be more useful for us to focus on a different issue in his writing. He insisted on focusing on this aspect. ... I think it is also difficult for students if they get conflicting advice, so he was getting one thing from one expert and another from another expert. What was he supposed to do with that? And it was difficult for me to know that he was feeling frustration that I couldn't really resolve

(T1).

With the two participants (student and consultant) struggling to resolve the conflict, the student made the final decision on what to do. As he put it,

How to use 'the' is still confusing, but I will follow my advisor's suggestion because she's my advisor. Otherwise, she'll ask me to correct it anyway. Besides, even though the consultant is a native speaker, she's not a researcher in the field of academic writing. I follow my advisor because she has been devoting herself to the field for a long time. How to use 'the' still bothers me, but I do pay extra attention to it whenever I'm writing (S1).

Although the student had made a final decision on the 'the' issue by following what his advisor would do, the question as to the correct usage still remained unanswered. It is interesting to note that in this case, the student took the advisor's comments on the linguistic issue despite the fact that they consider writing consultants as English language experts.

#### **Factors Influencing EFL Students' Choice of NES/NNES Writing Consultants**

The students in the current study varied in their preference for NES or NNES writing consultants according to concerns about their own overall English proficiency, their ability to communicate with writing consultants, and even their perceptions of the consultants' own English ability. As the non-English-major student remarked,

I think I will stutter a lot if I am talking to a native-English speaker consultant. I think communicating with consultants in my mother tongue [Chinese] is easy and efficient. Chinese allows for a more straightforward explanation of what I want to write in English. I am a little worried about the breakdowns in communication with foreign teachers (S3).

However, the two language students tend to prefer NES consultants. They show less confidence in the language-related comments received from the NNES consultants due to the consultants' lack of native speaker

intuition. Also, these students tend to be highly motivated to write native-like text, and therefore believe they can benefit more from a NES consultant. As one put it,

When I had a question on how to use a particular word and met with the Chinese consultant, I thought that maybe I should go to a native speaker to get more ideas about the word usage because I felt that the Chinese consultants were not quite sure about the word usage or how to sound more native-like (S2).

This sentiment is corroborated by another student:

The NES consultant told me that I tend to use big words and, as a native speaker of English, the consultant can tell me directly if it is a good try or not. ...I prefer a more complicated style of writing and love to try difficult words or native-like expressions that I learn from reading others' papers (S1).

The NES consultants also highlight their concerns over the possibility of communication breakdown during writing consultation due to the EFL students' insufficient language proficiency, the anxiety-provoking nature of the writing task itself, and the anxiety of the students in cross-cultural communication with foreigners. The following quotes indicate the writing consultants' observations in this regard:

So sometimes, there's an added stress that they have been trying to explain their information in a foreign language ... if they can't do it in their writing in the first place, it will be really hard for them to do it orally with me, and so I think I'm concerned mainly with the discomfort on the part of the student with their ability to make things clear (T1).

I feel a large part and useful part of writing consultation is the discussion about the writing, and I think to discuss matters in one's native language is so much more efficient as long as the teachers have the skills. I mean, there's already a high level of anxiety related to writing and even in your native language. And you know, there's additional pressure when you are a non-native (T1).

Speaking Chinese may be easier. ... Will you gain more from it? Yes, you'll probably understand, you get a better understanding of the rules maybe straight away (T2).

In short, the results reveal that the NES and NNES consultants provided benefits to the EFL students in different ways. The NES writing consultants provide advanced EFL learners with the language support that they need (e.g., native-like expression). On the other hand, NNES writing consultants' ability to speak the native language of the EFL students allows EFL students to communicate what they want to write easily. The staffing of both groups of writing consultants offers assistance that can accommodate the differences in the language proficiency of EFL students.

## **DISCUSSION**

Employing a Socratic approach, writing center pedagogy assumes that students are capable of articulating what they want to write and their writing problems (Thonus, 2003). Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest that this assumption needs to be re-evaluated in light of the different educational background of EFL students. Having been educated in a system in which students are always told what to do, learning by discussing and collaborating with another person may not be welcomed by EFL students nor come naturally to them. Moreover, as the essence of writing consultation is discussion about writing, an understanding of the metalanguage of writing (e.g., thesis statement, topic sentence, and transition) is a prerequisite for initiating and participating in a successful discussion (Thonus, 2003). For NES or ESL students, the metalanguage is often learned in writing courses. Given their limited training in English composition, EFL students may come to the writing center without having such knowledge. It is thus not surprising to observe that EFL students usually do not have questions or else ask very general ones such as "How can I improve my writing?" Therefore, to facilitate successful interaction with students in an EFL writing center such as in Taiwan, modifications to the assumptions underlying the establishment of a writing center and the adoption of flexible consultation approaches are important. For example, writing consultants may need to strike a balance between employing a directive and non-directive approach when tutoring students. It may sometimes be beneficial to students if the consultant takes on the role of a

writing teacher and offers explicit comments on their writing. Most importantly, clear explanations and negotiation with students about what to expect during the writing consultation would help students to adapt to this type of learning support and to bring about more positive learning outcomes.

The results of the study also corroborate a previous study on the tensions surrounding “intellectual territory” (Woodward-Kron, 2007, p. 254) in which some academic advisors expect writing consultants to “Fix the grammar. Don’t touch the content” (Woodward-Kron, 2007, p. 254). Having consultants develop their consultation expertise in a specific discipline may help enhance the effectiveness of the process of writing consultation. In other words, since each discipline constitutes a specific genre with its own “culture,” it will have its own conventions and rules about what is appropriate and effective (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). As writing is domain-specific, and writing practices, conventions, and purposes vary from one discipline to another (Beyer, Gillmore, & Fisher, 2007), there may be ways to conduct writing consultation that are more appropriate for one discipline than for another. There are limitations as to how much writing help can be provided in decontextualized writing consultation. Hence, expanding writing center services in an EFL context to include writing consultation across the curriculum is called for. This is especially true in writing centers based in Taiwan, where writing for publication is one of the main focuses. By working with faculty in various disciplines and familiarizing the writing consultants with the writing conventions in those disciplines, the efficacy of writing consultation can be extended and deepened. That being said, the role of differences in writing style among disciplines in writing consultation is one that has not been fully explored in the literature or in the current study.

The results of the interviews also show how cultural conventions, particularly the perceived authority of the academic advisor, influence the notion of authorship in students’ thesis writing. In Taiwan, for example, such papers are often co-authored and therefore closely monitored by a thesis advisor. These results corroborate previous research about cultural variation in the expectations of the roles of advisors and advisees in thesis/dissertation research. Asian students tend to expect their advisors to provide more directive help (Dong, 1998) with students holding less ownership in their thesis/dissertation. In addition, the hierarchical relationship of the advisor-advisee in a Chinese socio-cultural environment (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Pratt, 1991; Zhang, 2006) also

influences how fully students will accept comments from writing consultants. As the results of the current study indicate, the advisor seems to have the authority and ‘final say’ about what should be written in a student’s thesis due to the perceived authority of the advisor in the knowledge domain in question or to his/her authority within the socio-culture hierarchy. As Scollon and Scollon (1995) argue, “most Asians are quite conscious in an interaction who is older and who is younger, who has a higher level of education, who has lower level, who is in a higher institutional or economic position and who is lower, or who is teacher and who is student” (p. 81). Such views of authority could hinder or discourage students from making any further exploration into conflicting comments, resulting in students being unable to resolve certain issues in their minds.

Furthermore, issues concerning the breakdown of communication in EFL writing consultation due to language barriers and student anxiety might be more salient than it is in writing centers in English as second language (ESL) contexts. As EFL students in general have a lower language proficiency than ESL students due to the limited exposure to English and fewer chances to practice the language for authentic communication, the condition that both NES and NNES consultants be available allows for the opportunity to meet students’ needs. Staffing by NNES or bilingual consultants allows for capable and comfortable communication in the native language of the students and can assist those students who do not have sufficient English skills or confidence in communicating with NES consultants.

One limitation of the present study is that only graduate students were recruited. As undergraduate students represent a larger student population, their perceptions toward the use of the writing center also need to be further explored.

## **CONCLUSION**

As the context of language learning in western universities differs greatly from that in EFL settings, localization and negotiation need to be carried out when importing the writing center system from English-dominant systems into an EFL community. In other words, the issues related to the adoption of a flexible approach to writing consultation, to the need for writing-consultation-across-the-curriculum, and to the first language of

the writing consultant are all important factors influencing the success of writing centers in EFL contexts.

For future research, issues of native language, academic background, cultural dynamics and student-to-student peer review are all integral topics in research in writing consultation in EFL contexts. As language difficulties are the main reason for students to come to a writing center in the first place, the nature and extent of their language difficulties could have an impact on how they respond to the comments provided by NES and NNEST consultants. More studies on the style of consultation, the discourse patterns of consultation in an EFL context, and the students' subsequent revisions following consultation with NES and NNEST consultants would be of interest and could shed new light on the extent to which L1 and L2 communication mediums influence the effect of the process of the writing consultation both on students' attitudes and writing products.

In addition, as Rafoth (2004) pointed out, a consultant's unfamiliarity with a topic can influence how the writer receives the comments. The exploration of training writing consultants in specific content domains and the impact of this on consultation and student writing can contribute to wider perspectives on the effective training and development of faculty employed in writing centers.

Moreover, as the demand to write for publication is prevalent in doctoral programs in Taiwan, it has become common practice for students to co-author papers with their academic advisors to meet such graduation requirement. It is probable that this kind of 'apprenticeship-based' co-authoring relationship could shift the student writer's voice from 'I' to 'We' and limit the student writers' development of their own voice and authorship in the text. In other words, co-authoring with a more authoritative figure is likely to influence how student writers view and receive comments from a writing consultant, especially when comments from the advisor and the consultant are apparently in conflict. Thus, in an EFL context where the academic advisor holds strong sway over the student's thesis, it is important to re-examine the ways in which the power structure within the advisor–advisee relationship regarding the power over the text, which in turn influences the voice and identity of the student writer, has an impact on the process of the writing consultation.

The broad diversity in the academic backgrounds of EFL learners

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will continue to make demands on and shape a wide variety of learning support needed from writing centers. Furthermore, the possibility of including advanced EFL learners (e.g., TESOL MA students) as consultants in writing centers deserves further attention. Nevertheless, issues regarding the training of the peer consultants who themselves are also learners of the target language require further investigation. In addition, the redesign of consultation services that are suitable for peer consultants is called for (e.g., instead of providing on-site help, EFL peer consultants could be given a longer time to read the tutee's writing before the actual consultation session, thus, allowing them to check resources or even discuss their intended focus or comments on the writing with their supervisors).

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*Fang-Ying Yang & Yu-Chih Sun*

英語學習者寫作中心的使用：台灣的個案研究

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本研究探討寫作中心在以英語為外語地區（台灣）之實行結果。透過質性多重個案研究方法，深究學生及寫作中心教師對寫作諮詢的看法。結果顯示，學生和老師對於諮詢重心及諮詢方式持有不同看法。另外，寫作諮詢教師對學生專業領域之了解程度、學生指導教授所扮演的角色、及學生之英語能力皆為影響寫作中心實行結果之重要因素。本研究建議，由於寫作中心源於西方教育體系，在以英語為外語地區實施時，需針對各地區之種種特徵修改實行方式及目標。

關鍵詞：學術寫作、第二語言寫作、寫作中心、寫作諮詢、寫作指導