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Challenges and issues in academic writing: Perspectives from peer tutors

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Peer tutoring is not "a universal, undifferentiated and instant panacea" for improving teaching quality (Topping, 1996, p. 321). Yet it has its advantages and is widely used in higher education in a variety of formats whereby students serve as peer tutors and are "engaged as partners in teaching" (Stigmar, 2016, p. 124). Where peer tutoring in academic writing is concerned, previous research has mainly dealt with such aspects as effectiveness and formats (e.g., Adams, 2011; O'Sullivan & Cleary, 2014). Relatively less is known, however, about how peer tutors look at academic writing itself.

This paper looks at the views of 39 peer tutors on academic writing. These tutors were recruited as part of a peer tutoring programme in a Hong Kong university. The data come from different sources, including tutoring log sheets, end-of-programme evaluation forms and semi-structured focus interviews. Preliminary results show that their participation in the programme has contributed to their thinking about academic writing issues. In particular, they were able to identify recurrent problems in their tutees' academic writing and to develop ways of dealing with them. The research has implications for the teaching of academic writing in higher education.

Key words: peer tutoring; peer tutor; academic writing; Hong Kong

Introduction

Writing difficulties
Expertise in writing, even in one's first language, "is attained only rarely and only with great effort" (Weigle, 2005, p. 128). Writing is considered the most difficult skill to acquire by many English L2 writers (Nunan, 1999), for it entails far more than mere control over its linguistic elements (Weigle, 2002). In addition to grammatical and lexical competence, L2 writers need to demonstrate discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980 cited in Hyland, 2003), all of which are highly valued in disciplinary communities.

Chan (2010) found that written errors made by Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners are of four main types: morphological (0.42%), discoursal (1.28%), lexical (12.35%) and syntactic (85.96%). It is important to note that most of her subjects were secondary rather than university students. Other studies have a narrower focus. For example, Flowerdew (2006) identified a range of errors in the use of signalling nouns (e.g.

argument, fact) in argumentative essays written by Cantonese L1 first-year students at a university in Hong Kong.

In addition to linguistic problems, L2 writers also face organizational challenges. For example, university students of Arab and South Asian backgrounds have difficulty using effective thesis statements and topic sentences in argumentative writing (Miller & Pessoa, 2016). In the Chinese context, Kirpatrick (1997) found that, contrary to popular belief, traditional Chinese text structures do not influence mainland Chinese students' writing in Chinese and are unlikely to exert much influence on their writing in English. The lack of familiarity of some university students with academic writing conventions is shown by their inability to establish an appropriate tone and stance in their writing, which relies heavily on "skills of positioning and persuading, and the language resources they require" (Swain, 2009, p. 168).

Difficulties with content in L2 writing have received far less academic attention although it seems certain the quality of the content suffers because of students' need to focus more on language rather than on content (Weigle, 2002). This is further complicated by students' text interpretation problems (e.g. a faulty understanding of the source text or task instructions) and text generation (e.g. slowness in translating ideas into text).

Despite the findings of recent studies, it is important not to over-generalize since there is a wide spectrum of L2 writers with varying levels of language proficiency. For example, Eckstein and Ferris (2018) in their study of L1 and L2 texts and writers in a US university did not find that L2 students showed less sophistication in vocabulary use or less syntactic complexity than L1 writers. It is also important to note that the views on academic writing represented in the literature are mostly those of researchers and language teachers. It is therefore instructive to see how the issues and challenges of academic writing are seen by student peer tutors offering writing support in a Hong Kong university.

Previous research on peer tutoring
The concept of peer learning encompasses a wide range of applications and mediums, and functions as a mutually beneficial process "sharing… knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants" (Boud, 2001, p. 3). It happens inside or outside the classroom and involves focused interaction between students of similar academic levels. Particularly effective is peer tutoring between "pairs of students, with an asymmetrical relation and a common, known and shared objective" (Duran & Monereo, 2005, p. 181). Peer tutoring incorporates the additional dimension of the tutor acting as teacher and the tutee as student (Falchikov, 2001).

Peer tutoring is predominantly associated with the US model of a writing centre/lab (WC) which typically exists in an L1 environment where tutors and tutees are native speakers of the predominant language (Adams, 2011; O'Sullivan & Cleary, 2014; Ryan & Zimerelli, 2010). Although some studies of peer tutoring deal, either entirely or partially, with L2 tutees, most are tightly bound to the WC format (Thonus, 2002; Voigt & Girgensohn, 2015; Williams, 2004). The appropriateness of peer tutoring in L2 learning situations has been questioned on the grounds that it uses a Socratic model which may not be appropriate for L2 learners who expect more authoritative guidance (Voigt & Girgensohn, 2015). Williams (2004) observes that (Socratic) eliciting from L2 learners may prove unproductive because of insufficient background knowledge Tellingly, Zhang (1995) notes that the "claims made about the affective advantage of peer feedback in L1 writing do not apply to ESL writing" (p. 209).

Weigle and Nelson (2004) have contrasted tutors and teachers in terms of how they influence the students' writing. They found that tutors are more responsive to tutees' requests and tend to deal with organization rather than grammar. The data collected by Yang, Badger, and Yu (2006) confirms that more changes of whole-text meaning result from peer tutoring, while teachers' feedback leads to more local revisions of grammar and vocabulary. Peer feedback also promotes more self-correction, and less misinterpretation of writing prompts and fewer incorrect revisions. Interestingly, Waring (2005) found resistance to content-based advice from peer tutors.

Traditionally, research into peer tutoring has focused on its humanist, social, and cognitive benefits, notably tutors' multiple roles and personal attitudes, the degree of their engagement, and behavioural strategies (Jones, Garralda, Li, & Lock, 2006; O'Sullivan & Cleary, 2014; Thonus, 2002). However, much less is known about what tutors gain and their reflections on English academic writing. Additionally, there is little evidence about "the effects of tutoring on the subsequent written products" (Williams, 2004, p. 174). The present study aims to add to the literature on peer writing tutoring by seeking to answer two questions:

1. What are the academic writing difficulties from the peer tutors' point of view?
2. How do peer tutors deal with their tutees' writing difficulties?

The Peer Writing Tutoring Programme

The Peer Writing Tutoring Programme (hereafter, PWTP) under discussion transcends the conceptual frames of a traditional WC format. It aims to provide a supportive learning environment where linguistically more competent peers give weaker learners guidance on their academic writing. It assumes the role of a WC, and yet differs from it in several significant ways because it:

- selects as tutors, only senior university students with excellent results in English academic writing
- does not provide any monetary incentives to tutors
- is aligned with a specific aspect of a particular university English course
- deals exclusively with L2 tutees with unsatisfactory performance in English writing assessments, who volunteer for the programme

The PTWP adopts a curriculum-based model (as proposed by Weigle & Nelson, 2004) rather than the WC-based model. Its goal is specific and focuses on the similar learning needs of students within a particular curriculum. In particular, it helps them deal with the academic writing assignments in the two University English courses.

The tutors in this study either share or understand their tutees' writing limitations caused by their cultural background as Chinese speakers, which is expected to increase tutorial efficiency. It is believed that this cultural proximity and the fact that tutors and tutees share the status of L2 users will contribute to improvement in tutees' English writing skills. Contrary to the WC-based model, none of the tutors is paid, which creates a greater sense of equality and collaboration between tutors and tutees. This, coupled with their similarities in age, education, cultural background and learning experience can promote a closer rapport, produce better learning results and cultivate a spirit of giving and appreciation among tutors and tutees, which is in line with the university's mission of whole-person education.

The project design

Part of the language centre's mission is to provide two mandatory University English courses to all undergraduate students in their first year of study which is needed because the language of instruction, study and research in the university is predominantly English. The vast majority of students on these courses are ESL/EFL learners. Their common major difficulty is with English academic writing. The PWTP supports the weakest of those students. The study reported here is based on the operation of the PWTP during the academic year 2016/2017.

Selection process

Tutors

Tutors were recruited through an open call for students with a proven record of excellent academic writing skills, particularly those who had already completed University English I and II. All qualified applicants were interviewed for their suitability as advisors in terms of personality, experience, motivation and their professional knowledge, i.e. their ability to teach. They were also required to provide professional comments on a sample of student writing to evaluate their ability to identify and explain clearly the major problems with the sample work, using the metalinguistic knowledge necessary for advising.

Thirty-seven tutors were appointed, of whom 17 served longer than one semester. Tutors were predominantly local Hong Kong students (see Table 1). Usually, one tutor worked with one tutee per semester for a minimum of 3 consultation sessions and each session lasted for one hour. The mode of tutoring was face-to-face. A total of 172.5 hours of tutoring was provided by the tutors over the two semesters.

Tutees

Tutees were recruited from among low English proficiency students taking a writing enhancement course. Most of them were local students who received English level 3 in the Diploma of Secondary Education of Hong Kong (equivalent to IETLS 5.48-5.68, according to the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority). However, a few mainland students were included because they also had difficulties in academic writing. Thus, although it was not a feature of the design, all tutors were ethnic Chinese, with the majority being local Cantonese speakers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of tutors and tutees and place of origin in Semester 1 (S1) & Semester 2 (S2)

	Local (Hong Kong) (S1+S2)	Non-local (Mainland China) (S1+S2)
Tutors	13 +20 = 33	4 +2 = 6
Tutees	6 +11 = 17	12 +12 = 24

Peer tutor training workshops

Before the tutoring started in each semester, a workshop was organized to familiarize the tutors with the requirements of the tutees' academic assignments. This is important because weaker students sometimes misunderstand the task requirements, resulting in poor performance. Additionally, academic writing conventions which are not included in the University English courses are covered so that the tutors would be better equipped for their role. In response to tutors' feedback in Semester I, workshops in Semester II also included instruction in oral tutoring techniques.

Consultation log

Tutors kept a consultation log to help them remain organized, plan better and prepare for the next session. The log sheets include records of tutees' problems and actions taken by tutors. The project assistant had access to the logs and could intervene or offer suggestions as he saw fit.

Academic writing tasks

The PWTP focuses on the writing tasks of the two University English courses. The tasks in University English I include an annotated bibliography (developing summarising skills) and an argumentative essay. The writing tasks in University English II are a literature review on a relevant topic of students' own choice and an argumentative research article following on from the literature review assignment.

Data collection

The data were collected over two semesters of the programme's implementation and comprised the following:

- Tutees' reported self-needs analysis in application forms
- Tutees' writing samples
- Tutors' consultation log reports
- Tutees' end-of-programme questionnaires and interviews
- Tutors' end-of-programme questionnaires and interviews
- Tutees' English course results

Not all participants returned the questionnaires and/or came for the final interview. On the whole, more data were collected from informants in Semester 1 than in Semester 2. Generally, the tutees were less responsive than the tutors. A sample of 29 tutees' self-evaluation and needs analysis were collected during their application process. A total of 15 questionnaires from tutees were returned in Semesters 1 and 2 (4 and 11, respectively) in contrast to 37 questionnaires from tutors (20 and 17, respectively). Four tutors in Semester 1 and 17 tutors in Semester 2 were interviewed. There were 18 writing drafts, of which only 12 contain some evidence of the tutoring activities. In order to see whether tutees had made progress in their academic writing, their final grade from each University English course was obtained for comparison.

Results

The questionnaires completed by peer tutors at the end of each semester focused on their views on their tutees' most difficult areas in academic writing and their solutions. Table 2 shows the distribution of peer tutors' views about areas of difficulty for their tutees.

Table 2. Distribution of peer tutors' views of their tutees' areas of difficulty in academic writing

Area deemed most difficult for tutees	No. of peer tutors who held this view (semester 1)	No. of peer tutors who held this view (semester 2)
Language	10	7
Organization	6	8
Content	5	3

Language

Given the tutees' rather low proficiency in English, it is perhaps not surprising that ten out of 21 peer tutors in Semester 1 and seven out of 18 peer tutors in Semester 2 regarded language as the area which posed the greatest difficulty to tutees in their academic writing. The language problems identified include grammatical errors, collocational errors, limited vocabulary, Chinese English, missing linking devices and a non-academic tone. The following tutee's sample of writing (annotated bibliography) gives a sense of these language problems:

> In this article, Bergslien (2006) report on an announcement by the school was catering to a current trend to make student has an opportunity to understand the basic principles of science and provide the critical thinking exercise to teaching students how to apply forensic science. There also have a positive effect in science and CSI effect can available in daily life. But television will influence the accuracy in courtroom. There has some steps to avoid this side effect, make a time to compare and contrast the evidence of the case; it is importance to relate the project perform. Student though the science evidence can understand more of work and developing activities can provide the opportunity to discussion how to maintain objectivity of science. However, create an exercise to request student to analysis forensic science so that they absorb the relevant concepts. Forensic science had a boon for the science; it should advance the basic principles of science and critical thinking into classroom.

To help their tutees tackle such language errors the tutors normally pointed out and explained the mistakes, as illustrated in the following:

> Tutor 1
> I spotted the errors and let the tutee try to correct them. Then I explained those errors that my tutee didn't know how to correct.

This approach is reasonable, partly because of tutees' limited ability to spot their own mistakes and partly because of time constraints within consultations.

To help tutees with limited vocabulary, most tutors directly suggested useful words and phrases, though one tutor recommended some useful vocabulary websites to her tutee. The problem of vocabulary seems to have received more attention among some tutors than expected. The following excerpt from an interview with a peer tutor is particularly revealing about the complexity of lexical choice:

> Tutor 2
> It's the use of precise words, like the use of verbs, cohesive devices, like transitions, this kind of things. And sometimes the student would put words in a sentence in a way that doesn't make sense. […] I noticed that my tutee – he will look up words in the dictionary, and he'll look for, like, sophisticated words, but he doesn't really know how to use them. He'd just apply them in a sentence. But I think it might be better to replace it in a way that can make sense rather than just applying those complicated words.

It seems that vocabulary is a bigger hurdle than grammar in tutees' efforts to improve their writing skills and is also harder to teach. This may be because vocabulary is more context-dependent and carries more nuances, whereas grammar is less variable and relatively easier to manage if sufficient effort is made. Another possible reason is that it is difficult for tutees to unlearn what they have been taught. As Milton and Freeman (1996) have observed, Hong Kong learners of English across all levels of writing performance consistently and indiscriminately use a subset of fixed lexical expressions which are used sparingly, if at all, by native speakers. This may be partly due to the influence of tutorial schools, which tend to teach writing using model essays riddled with such expressions.

Some peer tutors also pointed to the lack of formality in their tutees' writing, and one in particular taught his tutee to use nominalization, a feature of academic writing highlighted in the training workshops.

Organization

Organisation also posed considerable difficulty to tutees in their academic writing (Table 2). More peer tutors in Semester 2 (eight out of 18) than in Semester 1 (six out of 21) rated organization as the most difficult area for their tutees. This suggests that the more demanding texts of Semester 2 (literature review and argumentative research paper) created more organisational difficulty. Problems related to organization include:

- Unclear topic sentences
- Lack of cohesive devices
- Inadequate or irrelevant supporting sentences
- Unfamiliarity with the components of a well-constructed paragraph
- Lack of coherence
- No clear text structure

In the following example, the peer tutor is extremely emphatic about the difficulty of organization:

> Tutor 3
> I consider ORGANIZATION the most difficult part, because it's not just like the rigid structure-because everybody knows introduction, body part, and then refutation, and then the conclusion. They have those rigid structure in mind, and they do it in a way, but the organization in this content is more about the logic-the internal logic flow within. For example, the tutee may write something in the introduction, stating his or her understanding of this issue, but later, in the next body part, he was arguing something else, so completely different from what he would state in the introduction, and then it's not-actually, irrelevant.

This highlights the difficulty of teaching organization as it entails a need for clear thinking. Tutors also commented on the impact on organisation when the writer is a Chinese speaker:

> Tutor 4
> Like use of Chinese way of logic to put things together, and also the use of the wordings. . . sometimes he thinks in a very Chinese way, that's why what he writes is a kind of Chinese— Chinglish, I would say, but is not good in English writing, especially in English course. And it takes really a lot of time to help him improve something like that, because it's about something he thinks—the way he thinks, and it cannot be changed immediately. […] The most difficult part will be the logic, for him.

The peer tutors were resourceful in teaching tutees organization, using different strategies, including:

- Adding cohesive devices
- Teaching the structure of an academic essay
- Teaching the components of a paragraph (e.g. topic sentence and supporting sentences)
- Teaching elaboration and explanation
- Teaching rebuttal

Particularly noteworthy is the use of cohesive devices, which can also contribute to textual coherence (see, for example, Lee, 2002) for a discussion on teaching coherence to ESL students in Hong Kong using a number of coherence-creating devices). As an example, this peer tutor has the following advice on organization:

> Tutor 5
> First, identify the problems and ask tutees to explain orally what are the points they want to make under this specific argument. Second, present my understanding as a reader to explain why the arguments written are not linked to the thesis and may cause misunderstanding. Third, use simple examples to show the flow of logical arguments. (For example, a mini-exercise on arguing that this pen is useful to me in terms is its color, size, etc.) Fourth, rethink and rewrite the arguments together with the tutees through reorganizing the ideas they intend to present. Fifth, suggest some evidence that could be used in supporting the arguments. Last but not least, if tutees have problems in dealing with the given article, a mind map will be provided to assist his or her reading and we will briefly go through the text together.

This tutor clearly had her own well developed ways of teaching her tutee how to organize ideas that she felt comfortable using.

Content
Content also presented problems for tutees. Five out of 21 peer tutors in Semester 1 and three out of 18 peer tutors in Semester 2 deemed content the most difficult area for their tutees in academic writing. Part of the reason, according to some peer tutors, was the difficulty of coming up with ideas. This might have been because tutees devoted more attention to issues of language than to higher-order issues of content (and organization). However, it might also have been due to problems understanding source texts or the task instructions, as pointed out by more than one of the tutors, for example:

Tutor 6
 … she may not understand the language of any given text or instructions and hence may find it hard to answer accordingly

Content-related problems also included wrong choice of topic and limited argumentation skills. To deal with such problems, peer tutors would correct/elicit/discuss/debate content or provide guidelines for specific as well as overall text-related problems. Below is a student sample, in which the peer tutor's comment on the tutee's content-related problem is given in bold type in brackets:

From a tutee's argumentative research paper
However, there is only a small part of traditional Chinese medicine that lacks of credibility and regulation (**controversy [contradiction] with the previous argument that thousands of herbal remedies contain Aristolochia and were sold under other herbs' name**), the major part of Chinese herbal medicine is well controlled under the government's management and has a higher treatment success rate than western medicine (better to separate into two ideas)

The comment below, by another peer tutor, is more specific:

Tutor 7
My tutee was weak in coming up with ideas. She failed to further elaborate or draw links between ideas. I guide her to think from different perspectives (social, economic, environmental, political) and evaluate how they are related to a particular theme or argument.

Tutees' results in University English courses

Under the PWTP, each peer tutor had at least three one-hour consultation sessions with his or her tutee. Before each session, the tutor usually received a draft of the tutee's work and went through it. After each session, there may have been a follow-up checking the tutee's work by email. This additional work resulted in a bigger input than the three hours of consultation and may have been responsible for the fairly satisfactory results tutees achieved in their University English course (Table 3).

Table 3. Tutees' results in University English courses

Semester I Grades (Total:23)	Semester II Grades (Total: 18)
A- (2)	A- (3)
B+ (4)	B+ (7)
B (11)	B (4)
B- (3)	B- (3)
C+ (2)	F (1) [no submission of two assignments]
C (1)	0

A comparison of the scores that tutees (N=41) obtained in University English courses with those of students who did not join the programme (Control Group, N=346)

from the writing enhancement course also shows peer tutees performed better, with an overall mean score of 71.18 and 72.75, compared to 68.61 and 71.13 respectively of the control group (Table 4). It should also be remembered when making this comparison that participants in the PWTP tended to be the weakest students in the cohort based on earlier performance.

Table 4. Peer tutees' performance in University English I and II

Groups	Mean of Overall Scores (out of 100)	
	University English I	University English II
Experimental Group in Sem. 1 (N=23)	71.18	N/A
Experimental Group in Sem. 2 (N=18)	N/A	72.75
Control Group (N=346)	68.61	71.13

Tutees' feedback

Of the 11 tutees who completed the questionnaire in Semester 2, almost all thought highly of their peer tutors and the peer writing tutoring programme. They (strongly) agreed that their peer tutors helped them identify the problems in their writing and suggested useful ways of dealing with those problems. All tutees except one felt more confident about handling academic writing after participating in the PWTP. Encouragingly, all found it useful and helpful and would recommend it to others.

Discussion and implications

The tutees' above average course results suggest that their peer tutors played a role in helping them improve. The tutees' own feedback bears this out. It seems that, compared with the University English course teachers, the peer tutors were in a somewhat better position to give writing guidance to their tutees for a number of reasons. First, they had previously taken the same University English courses and knew how to complete them successfully. Second, the one-on-one consultation mode allowed peer tutors to quickly grasp and tackle their tutees' writing problems. Third, cultural proximity probably helped. As one peer tutor said:

> Tutor 8
> Probably, her background, because she [tutee] and I are all from Mainland China, and I know very well what English education in high school or at middle school there. We focused on extension of vocabulary or lexicon there, and we are trained to learn grammar systematically and rigorously. However, how to say: we learn that in order to cope with the examination, not to further differentiate the different connotations that may infer I our stuff writing. So, she is very poor at this side. So I guess our education system has a great impact on the usage of words, and our English skills in general.

Nine peer tutors in Semester 2 attributed their tutees' weak writing skills to their pre-university educational background. Five peer tutors cited mother tongue interference as a possible cause of their tutees' weaknesses in academic writing.

Suggestions also emerged for improvement of University English courses. Nine peer tutors and four tutees suggested that sample academic essays should be provided in

class for reference and for discussions on how arguments are made in academic writing. This does not suggest mechanical copying from those samples but rather an opportunity to raise students' awareness of the many linguistic resources (both interpersonal and textual) they can draw on to perform different discourse functions in texts. There were also suggestions for putting more emphasis on organization of writing which indicates that students are particularly concerned about organising their writing and their ideas.

It must be acknowledged that this paper is based on a relatively small dataset and therefore the findings must be treated with some caution. Nonetheless, certain patterns are observable and provide important insights into the operation of the PWTP and, in particular, to the value-addedness it provides to the overall English programmes within the university. The tutors are valued by the tutees, the tutees' course scores exceed those of their classmates and the tutors gain from the experience.

Conclusion

Now in its fifth year, the PWTP is not without its limitations. However, it has been relatively successful in providing much-needed writing support to a group of students whose language needs may not be adequately met in class. To make it as effective as possible, more work remains to be done, especially in the following areas:

- Scaffolding and sample academic essays
- More focused practice in certain aspects of academic writing (e.g. nominalization)
- More communication and collaboration between tutors
- Finer-grained participant identification
- Involvement of University English course teachers

With increased accumulation of data in the years to come, the current project can provide researchers with sufficient data for more reliable generalizations. There is much more to academic writing than a regular university English course can teach. There are various ways of closing this gap and the PWTP is clearly one successful way. Most importantly, the value of the PWTP lies in its personalized nature and its distinctly human touch, which is well illustrated by this comment from a peer tutor:

> Tutor 9
> I arranged a first preliminary session not talking about any writing, just sitting, and we know each other, know her interests, and asked her what's in her opinion the most challenging issues and language skills for her. And I brought some reference books for her to recommend.

Acknowledgements

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