# Practical Autonomy-Supportive Tutoring Strategies for Multilingual Student-Writers and a Writing Center Tutor Handbook

**HeeJae Chung,** *Texas State University*
**Lauren E. Chaney,** *Texas State University*
**Dr. Carlton J. Fong,** *Texas State University*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**HeeJae Chung** *is a Ph.D. student in the Adult, Professional, and Community Education Program at Texas State University. She holds an M.A. in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and a B.F.A. in Production Design. She has developed and taught a variety of English lessons across numerous settings in Korea and the U.S. Her research interests include adult learning, English language-culture teaching, and virtual learning experience design. As a practitioner-scholar with a design background, she is particularly interested in the design and implementation of creative strategies and resources to motivate and stimulate learning among international adult learners.*

**Lauren E. Chaney** *is a Ph.D. student in the Adult, Professional, and Community Education Program at Texas State University. In 2016, she graduated from the University of Houston-Downtown with a MA in Rhetoric and Composition. She has previous experience working as a consultant and workshop coordinator at the Writing Center at Texas State University. Her research interests include writing center studies, civic literacy, and antiracist rhetoric.*

**Dr. Carlton J. Fong** *is an assistant professor in the Graduate Program in Developmental Education and the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas State University. As a scholar-activist at the intersection of educational psychology and higher education, Dr. Fong uses a sociocultural lens to study motivational and affective factors influencing postsecondary student engagement, achievement, and persistence. Specifically, he examines the motivation factors associated with feedback and the psychosocial development of community college students. He is also an expert in meta-analysis and research synthesis on topics related to psychosocial and motivation factors in postsecondary contexts.*

Writing centers are an important learning support resource that assist students to become successful writers with various academic backgrounds and abilities (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011). For decades, writing centers have been conceptualized as learning communities (Grimm, 1999) and "homey" environments (McKinney, 2013, p. 7). Although they are designed to support all students, there is a growing need for writing centers to support the academic development of multilingual students (Schneider, 2018), in part due to the rapidly increasing number of international students (Institute of International Education, 2018).

The mission of most writing centers is to cultivate effective and independent writers. However, in sessions with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, tutors tend to make direct edits on their writing products despite writing center policies that discourage such practices and encourage process-oriented writing instruction (Cheatle, 2017; Kim, 2018). One cause for this problem might be the minimal tutor training of specific techniques to best support multilingual students' writing development. The focus of this article is a promising practice to support writing tutors called *autonomy-supportive* instructional strategies (Reeve & Jang, 2006), which are designed to nurture students' inner motivational resources. We integrated the model of autonomy-supportive instructional strategies with the existing literature on English language teaching and writing center practices. In addition, we incorporated reflections on our teaching experiences with adult multilingual writers. We conclude by presenting 11 hypothesized autonomy-supportive tutoring strategies to use among multilingual student-writers and a writing tutor handbook that encompasses our synthesis of the literature and our experiences.

### Literature Review

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) emphasizes that individuals' ideal functioning requires three psychological needs to be met: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Grounded in this theory, numerous studies in various fields

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suggest the importance of teacher autonomy-support—how instructors nurture student's inner motivational resources (i.e., interests, preferences, values) to boost student persistence and motivation for learning (Karimi & Abszedeh, 2017; Kusurkar et al., 2012; Reeve et al., 1999). In fact, Reeve (2006) argued that a central role for instructors is to facilitate students' autonomy. Reeve further concluded that instructors should structure learning environments to nurture and expand on students' learning experiences. Autonomy-supportive teaching strategies typically involve (a) allowing students to meaningfully choose learning activities, (b) using informational, non-controlling language, (c) communicating task value and providing rationales, (d) incorporating student perspectives to ensure students feel respected and motivated, and (e) acknowledging students' expressions of unpleasant emotion (Patall & Zambrano, 2019; Reeve & Jang, 2006).

In the context of English language teaching (ELT), multiple studies have highlighted the importance of instructors with regards to multilingual learners' motivation, confidence, and sense of autonomy. For example, Clément et al. (1994) found that instructors' rapport with students was associated with language learners' linguistic self-confidence and anxiety. Examining language learners' self-determination with language learning, Noels (2001) observed that language learners with more choices of their learning activities reported higher levels of intrinsic or internalized motivation. Autonomy-support is related to an ELT construct called learner autonomy (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Holec, 1981; Sinclair, 2000). One important aspect of learner autonomy is the role of scaffolding. Cotteral and Cohen (2003) proposed key elements of scaffolding that support autonomous learning with reading: modeling of expert strategies, providing cues to adopt new strategies, practicing and discussing the new strategies, and providing immediate feedback on their performance. These recommended strategies can be used to improve language learners' writing, speaking, and listening.

## Product

Applying Reeve and Jang's (2006) conceptualization of autonomy-support and the ELT construct of learning autonomy, we developed a framework of autonomy-supportive tutor instructional strategies designed for serving multilingual students. This framework incorporates scaffolding (Cotteral & Cohen, 2003), learner autonomy in ELT (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Sinclair, 2000), and autonomy-supportive elements of instructors as facilitators (Patall & Zambrano, 2019; Reeve & Jang, 2006). In this framework, we curated 11 autonomy-supportive instructional strategies for writing tutors working with multilingual student-writers:

1. *Plan the tutoring session time efficiently:*
Practitioners should ask students the specific deadline of the assignment and their availability for investing more time on the paper after the session. Negotiating the agenda at the beginning provides structure and guidance that builds on students' needs. It also promotes modeling of expert strategies and conscious awareness of the learning process, facilitating development of skills to actively plan the writing process with future assignments.

2. *Actively ask for the students' learning goals*: Students commonly request that tutors edit or proofread their writing assignment based on the misconceptions of the writing center services (Cheatle, 2017). Some students might not come with a clear goal either. It is, therefore, critical to ensure that their learning goals are achievable and aligned with the writing center policies. Students should be given choices to redirect their goals accordingly while also nurturing their interests. Start the session with questions like, "What would you like to achieve today?" to help formulate appropriate learning goals for the session.

3. *Offer opportunities for students to talk:* In some cultures, students are not accustomed to expressing their intentions or thoughts to an instructor (Blau, Hall, & Sparks, 2002). Taking a culturally specific perspective, offering students the time to organize and express their thoughts out loud, at their own pace, can help enhance their sense of autonomy and competency. It can also provide them the opportunity to process and reflect on their concerns regarding their writing. Tutors should encourage students to ask questions anytime during the session.

4. *Offer opportunities for students to process feedback in their own ways:* All cultures have different writing orientations and decision-making processes—e.g., contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan, 1966). Giving feedback can potentially conflict with their existing knowledge or past learning experiences. Try identifying feedback processing strategies that work best for students. If students struggle with following verbal feedback, visual tools such as concept maps can help them stay engaged and understand key points of the feedback.

5. *Provide specific rationales:* Rather than providing implicit directions (Nan, 2012), explaining specifically why certain changes need be made can help students understand and consciously reflect on their errors. Rationales can help them internalize writing mechanics as they develop as writers.

6. *Ask for students' intentions:* All students have cultural schemata that affect their writing processes and writing styles (Blau et al., 2002). Understanding students' perspectives and, thus,

their intentions behind their choices of words or organization can help inform tutor feedback and help students feel respected and motivated. For example, tutors may ask students, "Let's explore what is behind your idea here. Discuss with me your goal for this paper."

7. *Provide feedback by asking guiding questions:* Instead of providing directive local-level feedback (Myers, 2003), ask probing questions to get the students involved in the process of making the changes. For instance, "What kind of word might be appropriate here?" and "How about we restructure this statement together?" Such questions can increase students' meta-cognitive awareness throughout the editing process (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

8. *Offer meaningful encouragement with hints for improvement:* "You are almost there. Consider changing A, B, and C before you finalize the paper!" Such an encouragement, especially using words like "consider," "could," or "might" can boost students' confidence and guide them to evaluate further their writing process after the tutoring session (Patall & Zambrano, 2019).

9. *Praise students for their ideas and efforts:* Students often perceive their overall proficiency and skills lower than how tutors perceive them. Crediting their effort on building a well-thought-out writing piece can boost their confidence.

10. *Communicate perspective-taking statements:* When students express their struggles with the writing process, acknowledging and validating their challenges can help them feel less isolated within the English language writing culture (Lee & Schaller, 2008). Communicating perspective-taking statements such as "I would also struggle writing this paper! The topic is difficult" or "English grammar can be very confusing. I also get confused with the rules" can help students feel connected to the tutor's guidance as well as the English writing culture.

11. *Be responsive to all types of questions*: When students ask questions, the topics can vary from grammatical structure to cultural information. As a tutor, however, it is vital to be aware that some students may ask questions after long contemplation because of culturally and linguistically different teaching-learning practices. Thus, responses such as "That's a good question" or "I never thought of it that way" can promote the practice of asking questions for learning and value their effort to seeking help.

Based on the proposed model, we designed a writing tutor handbook (Chung, Chaney, & Fong, 2020) to assist writing centers and tutors in their support of multilingual student-writers. In the handbook, we included detailed descriptions of each strategy, example situations, and recommended practices.

## Conclusion

The article presents the promising practice of autonomy-supportive tutoring strategies for multilingual students in writing centers. We synthesized different fields of teaching practices to provide motivationally supportive tutoring instruction for multilingual student-writers. Most importantly, we encourage writing centers to offer formal tutor trainings that address needs of student-writers with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. With the proposed model of autonomy-supportive tutoring strategies, we invite scholars and practitioners to implement such practices in various contexts. It is critical for writing centers to establish an inclusive and motivating model of practice to better support multilingual student-writers.

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