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## Tutor Perceptions of a University Writing Centre's Program of Skills Development for Supporting Multilingual Students using English as an Additional Language

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# Tutor Perceptions of a University Writing Centre's Program of Skills Development for Supporting Multilingual Students using English as an Additional Language

## Abstract

With growing numbers of multilingual students who have first or primary languages other than English seeking the services of Canadian university writing centres where English is the language of instruction, providing these students with supportive and effective teaching and learning experiences is an important part of their post-secondary education. However, little research has been carried out to examine the impact of writing centre tutor skill development programs to foster meaningful teaching and learning experiences for multilingual students. This qualitative study employed focus group research methods to gather the writing centre tutors' shared perceptions of their skill development opportunities for working with multilingual students. Data were coded and analyzed using a thematic approach. Findings point to multilingual student expectations, tutoring challenges, program effectiveness, and program applicability as elements that impact the tutors' overall impressions of the skill development opportunities they encountered. While there were still areas for improvement, implementing a program of skill development for working with multilingual students in a writing centre was generally beneficial for the tutors in this study.

Le nombre d'étudiants et d'étudiantes multilingues dont la langue maternelle ou principale est autre que l'anglais et qui ont besoin des services des centres d'écriture dans les universités canadiennes où la langue d'instruction est l'anglais augmente et il est important d'offrir à ces étudiants et à ces étudiantes des expériences d'enseignement et d'apprentissage efficaces durant leurs études post-secondaires. Toutefois, peu de recherches se sont penchées sur la question pour examiner l'impact des programmes de développement des compétences à l'intention des tuteurs des centres d'écriture qui favorisent des expériences d'enseignement et d'apprentissage enrichissantes pour les étudiants et les étudiantes multilingues. Cette étude qualitative a employé des méthodes de recherche par groupes cibles pour assembler les perceptions partagées des tuteurs de centres d'écriture concernant leurs opportunités de développement des compétences pour travailler avec des étudiants et des étudiantes multilingues. Les données ont été encodées et analysées à l'aide d'une approche thématique. Les résultats indiquent que les attentes des étudiants et des étudiantes multilingues, les défis qui confrontent les tuteurs, l'efficacité des programmes et l'applicabilité des programmes sont des éléments qui ont un impact sur les impressions globales des tuteurs concernant les opportunités de développement des compétences auxquelles ils ont été exposés. Bien qu'il reste encore des domaines qui doivent être améliorés, la mise en oeuvre d'un programme de développement des compétences pour les personnes qui travaillent avec des étudiants et des étudiantes multilingues dans un centre d'écriture est généralement bénéfique, tel que vécu par les tuteurs qui ont participé à cette étude.

## Keywords

writing centre, English as an additional language, tutor development, tutor perspectives, post-secondary education, multilingual students, international students; centre d'écriture, anglais langue additionnelle, développement des tuteurs, perspectives des tuteurs, enseignement post-secondaire, étudiants et étudiantes multilingues, étudiants internationaux et étudiantes internationales

Students from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds enrich post-secondary campuses across Canada. While newcomers and local students with home languages other than English account for some of the linguistic diversity in Canadian higher education, a growing number of incoming students on Canadian campuses are international students, with over 600,000 international post-secondary students studying in Canada at the end of 2021 (Crossman et al., 2022; Statistics Canada, 2016). Domestic and international students who speak more than one language, and for whom English is an additional language, are referred to as multilingual students in this paper. As with all students who are new to post-secondary studies, interacting with the local campus community in an institution where English is the language of instruction requires multilingual students to gain familiarity with the writing conventions of the various disciplines in which they are studying (Hyland, 2002; Hyland, 2006).

An important part of the overall landscape of teaching and learning in higher education, university writing centres aim to support student writers from a wide range of backgrounds as they develop their writing skills in a post-secondary setting. Writing centres are “learning support units that provide and facilitate academic writing mentorship and instruction” (Bell & Hotson, 2021, p. 1). In this role, writing centres are a significant resource for multilingual students writing in English (Chang & Goldrick-Jones, 2019). However, writing centre tutors may feel underprepared to support multilingual students with a first language other than English when compared to students with English as their first or primary language (Comeau-Kirschner, 2014). Although it has been recognized that tutors need to have access to specialized skill development opportunities for working with multilingual students (Pilin et al., 2020), and there have been calls for writing centres to better prepare for the actualities of post-secondary student writing in Canada (e.g., Bell & Hotson, 2021), less inquiry has been directed toward how tutors receive this skill development support based on their self-perceived needs and the overall impact of this development on their tutoring practice.

The authors of this study come to this topic from a range of disciplinary backgrounds related to teaching English as an additional language (EAL), psychology, writing studies, and education. The authors also come to this study with varied language backgrounds. The purpose of this study was to explore, from the point of view of the tutors in a writing centre at a university in western Canada, the perceived value of a program of tutor skill development opportunities for working with multilingual students. The impetus behind this endeavour was to understand the efficacy of these skill development opportunities and use this information to enhance teaching and learning in the writing centre. To carry out the goal of understanding the efficacy of skill development opportunities to enhance writing centre services, a qualitative approach employing focus group data collection and subsequent thematic analysis was employed by the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mills & Gay, 2016; Williams & Katz, 2001). Several major themes were identified in the study, including students' expectations, tutoring challenges, program effectiveness, and knowledge application. These themes point to the benefits of implementing a program of ongoing skills development for tutors working with multilingual students in writing centres.

## **Developing Skills for Tutoring Multilingual Students in a Writing Centre**

### **Expanding Awareness, Intercultural Communication, and Instructional Strategies**

For this study, a particularly important aspect of the skill development for tutors who support multilingual students is skill development programs enhancing a tutor's language awareness. In general, tutors benefit from having expertise in both global and sentence-level writing issues (Blau et al., 2002). Tutors serve as linguistic informants, with tutors and their students benefiting from being able to understand grammar rules and exceptions to those rules. Students generally want critical feedback (Simpson & Wayne, 2016). As such, developing a metacognitive understanding of English aligns with the types of support multilingual students may need when they visit a writing centre. To develop this metacognitive understanding, writing centres can aim to foster tutors' explicit knowledge of sentence-level language issues (Moussu, 2013). In particular, novice tutors place a high level of importance on building their knowledge of grammar and frequent errors so that they can be better prepared to serve in this role of linguistic informant and meet the perceived needs of students in a writing centre (Cushing-Weigle & Nelson, 2004).

Also prevalent in the literature on skill development programs for writing centre tutors is the discussion around providing learning opportunities that foster intercultural awareness. As studies have shown (Pilin et al., 2020), tutors can also serve as cultural informants, and writing centre tutors have previously indicated that they want to develop their intercultural communication skills. A range of environmental factors and intercultural communication skills impact interactions between tutors and multilingual students. For example, writing centre tutors have been found to express a desire to develop their ability to effectively recognize and ameliorate communication breakdowns caused by challenges related to intercultural factors (Pilin et al., 2020). Writing centres are cultural contract zones where languages, literacies, and cultures all converge. Consequently, tutors need to be aware of the impact that culture, rhetoric, understandings, and language choices can have on power dynamics within writing consultations (Min, 2016). To support this understanding, tutor skill development programs can focus on how tutors can negotiate tutoring session agendas and emphasize inquiry. This type of active participation in writing consultations tends to lead to more meaningful revisions in writers' drafts, with negotiation and focus on inquiry requiring writing centre tutors to be able to effectively navigate intercultural communication (Bell, 2019; Nakamaru, 2010).

Relevant to the current study, the writing centre tutor skill development literature emphasizes the need to support tutors in building their knowledge of instructional strategies. To better meet the needs of multilingual students seeking help in university writing centres more systematically, Dooley (2001) has recommended that tutors receive skill development opportunities facilitated and led by more experienced peers with EAL teaching experience. Vertical sharing of expertise from expert to novice is important along with other forms of learning exchanges (Marsh et al., 2015). With the support of an expert in EAL teaching and learning, tutor skill development programs can foster a wider range of pedagogical approaches and expand tutors' ideas related to teaching. Having a range of instructional skills at the ready can help tutors balance sentence-level issues while also focusing on a student's overall text (Nakamura, 2010). Tutors can benefit from a more practical understanding of instructional strategies because without a wider range of teaching approaches, tutors may be less systematic in how they support multilingual students (Comeau-Kirschner, 2014). Students have also reported experiencing a lack of standardization across tutoring sessions (Simpson & Wayne, 2016). To rectify these types of situations, Comeau-Kirschner

(2014) has argued that skill development sessions for writing centre tutors should mirror EAL classes to illuminate how EAL instructional approaches may enhance consultations with multilingual students over more traditional approaches that might be used with students whose first or primary language is English. With a wider range of instructional strategies for working with multilingual students, tutors can move away from deficit management approaches and instead adopt approaches that incorporate inquiry and negotiation (Williams, 2004; Eckstein, 2019).

### **Modes of Skill Development Opportunities**

In aiming to identify the perceived value of skill development programs for writing centre tutors, it is also important to acknowledge the relevant literature on suitable modes of program delivery. For effectively working with multilingual students at university writing centres, there appears to be a need for ongoing and interactive skill development opportunities, with these opportunities best supported both in-person and online (Pilin et al., 2020). Unfortunately, specific skill development for supporting multilingual students either may not be available or be reduced to isolated workshops which may group multilingual students as a single demographic of learner with universal needs and expectations (Powers & Nelson, 1995; Wilson, 2012). There may also be an overemphasis on expertise rather than a goal of recognizing individual multilingual student concerns (Harris & Silva, 1993; Nowacek & Hughes, 2015). With these issues in mind, ongoing support for tutors would be better facilitated by a move beyond merely providing a list of useful tips (Nakamaru, 2010). It would also be better facilitated by less reliance on structured programs and required readings and an increase in experiential approaches (Geller et al., 2007). Tutor skill development can also aim to challenge the assumptions tutors may have about multilingual students writing in English and how additional languages are learned (Bell, 2019; Chang & Goldrick-Jones, 2019).

Along with these suggestions, writing centre directors can seek ways to provide opportunities for tutors to come together and discuss their experiences. There is a need for ongoing learning through dialogue and reflection related to writing centre tutors' experiences in consultations, and these types of discussions can take place in low-stakes, learning-centred environments that include opportunities for tutors to share and reflect (Hall, 2011; Mattison, 2007). These ongoing interactions can help create a social setting in which tutors share experiences and resources and engage in social learning (Lawson, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

Because the linguistic challenges facing EAL writers can lead to “inequities in how ... students are assessed and evaluated” (Deng et al., 2022), it is important that writing centres work toward inclusive excellence that accounts for linguistic diversity. To achieve this goal, understanding how writing centre tutors perceive their skill development opportunities as they support diverse communities of writers is of paramount importance. As such, this study explores tutors' perceived value of a skill development program for working with multilingual students, examines the efficacy of this program, and identifies potential areas of improvement. The overarching research question is as follows: What are the writing centre tutors' experiences related to a program of skill development for working with multilingual students? Out of this overarching research question, two supporting research questions were also asked:

1. What are writing centre tutors' experiences with working with multilingual students?
2. What are the writing centre tutors' experiences related to a program of skill development for working with multilingual students?

## **The Study**

### **Participants**

Writing tutors at a writing centre at a public university in British Columbia were invited to participate in a focus group, with nine out of a total of 17 tutors agreeing to take part in this study. Most of the participants had worked at the writing centre for one academic year, though their range of experience was from one to three years as paid writing centre employees. Participants in the study had not participated in any formal skill development for working with multilingual students aside from the skill development offered through the writing centre, although one participant reported having taken a course in adult education at the university. However, the participants did report a variety of informal types of skill development opportunities, such as working in adult education, living abroad, and tutoring English during high school. Participants were not asked to report their age or gender. While participants were not specifically asked about their personal multilingual experiences, several participants reported being multilingual (i.e., in French and English or in Spanish and English).

### **The Writing Centre**

The current study took place at a public university in British Columbia, where the writing centre was one of several resources available to help students succeed academically. Other supports included an English for academic purposes pathway program for multilingual students who had not yet met the university's English language proficiency requirements. The university included approximately 10,000 undergraduate students, with 17% percent of those students registered as international undergraduate students. At the time of the study, international students came from a variety of countries across the globe, with fairly large numbers of students from China, the United States, India, and South Korea. Just over a third of the students who accessed the writing centre were international students, with 36% of the appointments during the year this study took place occurring with students who reported having a first or primary language other than English.

The writing centre in this study serves undergraduate students. Undergraduate students could book 25 to 50 minute online or in-person appointments to be scheduled between 10 am and 5 pm. Students were asked to bring their assignment and the assignment instructions to their appointments. After meeting with a student, tutors would write a short summary of the appointment and send both the summary and any relevant resources or suggestions to the student via e-mail. Writing tutors worked on a variety of student concerns regarding writing, including grammar, thesis statements, time management, proofreading skills, and the structure/flow of papers. As per the writing centre's policies, tutors were instructed to avoid proofreading students' work due to academic integrity concerns, but tutors were encouraged to help improve students' skills and self-efficacy. Writing centre tutors were also subject to several other policies, including not working on take-home exams, not discussing marks that students may receive on their

assignments, and having a maximum of 100 minutes of consultations per student per week, except where an accommodation was needed.

### **Program of Skill Development for Supporting Multilingual Students**

Previous research in the writing centre had identified a number of areas in which tutors felt they could use more skill development for working with multilingual students (Pilin et al., 2020), and a program of skill development opportunities was created in response to that previous study to foster improved teaching and learning experiences in the writing centre. Elements of this initiative included opportunities to work collaboratively with an expert in EAL teaching and learning who was a PhD student in Education at the time of this study. Topics covered with the EAL teaching and learning expert related to additional language acquisition, grammar, sentence structure, and feedback. In particular, workshops were provided at the beginning, middle, and end of each semester. A curated list of useful websites including descriptions for tutors was also created (Appendix A).

As shown in Figure 1, several different kinds of skill development opportunities were offered to tutors at the writing centre. Tutors received initial skill development support prior to the start of the academic year over two days of intensive workshops (one day per week, for two weeks). The intensive workshops covered topics such as tutoring strategies, working with multilingual students, and confidentiality. The two days of workshops included a morning in-person interactive workshop dedicated to supporting multilingual students. It was facilitated by the EAL teaching and learning expert and focused on developing the tutors' understandings of additional language acquisition, awareness of grammar, and micro (sentence-level) and macro (genre-level) issues of English writing most commonly encountered by multilingual students. Newly-hired tutors were also required to shadow an experienced tutor for one appointment. Upon completing the initial skill development workshops and shadowing, tutors were eligible to start meeting with students independently. Staff meetings were held regularly and often included ongoing skill development opportunities from visiting speakers and writing centre supervisors. At the beginning of the second semester, the tutors participated in a full-day workshop on intercultural communication. This workshop was led by the same expert in EAL teaching and learning as the initial workshop and focused on communicating effectively with multilingual students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, communication styles, cultures, and identities. Ongoing skill development with the expert in EAL teaching and learning took place during four staff meetings (two during the winter semester and two during the spring semester). These sessions were coined "Lingbits," a portmanteau of linguistic and bits. The purpose of the Lingbits sessions was to address tutors' questions related to grammatical terminology and grammatical rules, familiarize the tutors with the curated list of websites, and share strategies for how to address common errors or challenges they encountered during writing consultations with multilingual students. Questions and concerns were solicited by the writing centre supervisor prior to each skill development session to be as responsive as possible to the needs of the tutors. Tutors also completed portfolios, including assigned readings, throughout the course of each semester. Each semester, tutors would meet individually with their supervisor to discuss their progress.

**Figure 1**

*Overview of Tutor Professional Development Process*

| <b>Skill Development Support</b>   | <b>Aug</b> | <b>Sep</b> | <b>Oct</b> | <b>Nov</b> | <b>Dec</b> | <b>Jan</b> | <b>Feb</b> | <b>Mar</b> |
|------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Two-day Intensive Workshops        |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Shadowing Experience               |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Independent Consultations          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Monthly Staff Meetings             |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Full-day Workshops with EAL Expert |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Lingbits provided by EAL Expert    |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |

**Data Collection**

Before the study began, it was reviewed and approved by the behavioural research ethics board at the university where the writing centre was located. Once research ethics approval was received and a “Certificate of Approval—Minimal Risk” was issued, a qualitative approach was used for the data collection and analysis (Mills & Gay, 2016), with focus group methods being used to collect data related to the participants’ perceptions of the skill development opportunities in their writing centre. A focus group was chosen to obtain a shared sense of the tutors’ points of view and to empower participants to provide rich data that could be used to inform future decision making and program modification to improve the teaching and learning experiences in the writing centre (Mills & Gay, 2016; Williams & Katz, 2001). Participants were recruited through email invitations and through a brief announcement at a staff meeting to the writing centre tutors. Email invitations were sent out two weeks in advance of the focus group and a reminder was made approximately one week in advance of the focus group. Potential participants who expressed interest in taking part in the study were invited to a group Zoom call. At the start of the Zoom call, the focus group facilitator summarized the consent form and answered any participant questions before giving the prospective participants the opportunity to click on a link and provide an e-signature on an online consent form to indicate their agreement to take part in the study. The focus group lasted approximately one hour. No compensation, beyond that which they would receive within the normal course of their employment, was provided.

The focus group was conducted through a semi-structured question and answer format. The questions explored the participants’ experiences related to the skill development opportunities in the writing centre. The open-ended questions revolved around several themes, including tutors’ confidence in their abilities to tutor multilingual students, multilingual student expectations of tutors, and perceived challenges related to tutoring multilingual students. The questions specifically having to do with the newly implemented skill development opportunities asked participants about the effectiveness of the offerings, the implementation of their new skills, and their opinions on the skill development formats (i.e., online vs. in-person). The list of questions is included in Appendix B.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis was carried out by two researchers using a consensus model of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mills & Gay, 2016). Data were first examined for units of meaning (sentences and phrases which could stand on their own as pieces of information) by one



researcher. Afterwards, the transcripts and units of meaning were examined by a second researcher. As researchers examined the data (i.e., transcripts), the codes were developed for the units of meaning at that time, rather than starting with a pre-determined list of codes (Saldaña, 2013). The codes were then gathered together into meaningful themes. In reporting the results, representative quotes associated with the coded units of meaning are provided to explain each theme. Quotes are reported exactly as provided by the recipients, and they may contain non-standard English. However, minor typographical errors have been corrected to facilitate ease of reading. Filler words, such as “uh,” “um,” or “like” were also omitted to facilitate readability.

## Results

### Multilingual Student Expectations Regarding Aspects of Writing and Tutor Roles

Several themes were identified related to multilingual student expectations of tutors in the writing centre. Grammar was a primary concern of multilingual students. For instance, one tutor remarked “I think some of them have an expectation of how just to fix or improve the grammar in the papers that they’re doing, but most students actually do have an expectation of us to teach them how to do that.” Another tutor commented that “they wanna sound like they know what they’re talking about and they have control over the language.” The same tutor went on to note that desiring control over the English language meant that some multilingual students may expect tutors to focus on fixing grammatical errors found in their work. In a similar vein, another tutor commented, “they want their paper to [sound] more like a native English speaker.” The focus group participants seemed to indicate that while multilingual students may present with grammar concerns, their overarching desire was to hold control over the language and thus allow their work to sound similar to that of peers from English speaking backgrounds.

On the topic of editing students’ work, some tutors commented that editing might be an initial expectation of multilingual students during their first appointment, stating, “I feel like that’s more true when they come for the first time. They’re like ‘oh yeah, you’re just going to edit my paper’ but when they come again they already know how it works, so they actually want you to teach them how to fix their paper.” Another tutor indicated, “I have had some very good collaborative sessions with some students, where I show them like certain techniques and then during the session itself, you actually do see them applying the techniques to their work in real-time.” Similarly, another tutor described two situations over two terms where students had wanted the tutor to edit their papers; the tutor noted, “one of them left a little frustrated, but the other one understood after we talked about it [but] I can’t really do that.” On the same topic, a different tutor noted a desire for edits is common in both multilingual students and students from English speaking backgrounds: “everyone just wants their papers edited and they think that’s what the writing centre is there for.” The general consensus among tutors seemed to be that while an expectation of editing occurs in some situations with students, effective communication can preempt this issue.

Related to whether multilingual students’ general expectations differed from those of other students, a tutor remarked, “say two students were working on the same assignments for the same class, yeah I think they’ll have the same general expectations of what to write, and how to fix the grammar when they’re done, and things like that.” In the same vein, one tutor indicated that some multilingual students who are advanced in their English language skills may ask for assistance with grammar, but in fact would typically be more likely to want to work on flow and clarity. The

same tutor noted, “people mean a lot of different things by ‘grammar,’ so I often don’t get a clear answer..., and I also get that from, from native English speakers.” It seems that, while some concerns and interactions within the writing centre might be more common to multilingual students, many of the concerns that these students present with are very similar to those of other students on campus.

### **Tutoring Challenges: Balancing Goals and Explaining Grammar**

There were also aspects of working with multilingual students that the tutors in this study found challenging. One common theme was trying to balance the goal of helping multilingual students with their writing with other concerns. For example, one tutor described how “we’re always trying to help the students to learn and to understand why something is wrong so they can apply that to their paper, so it’s trying to balance all of that while still getting the point across of ‘it’s not how we would use that in an academic paper’ ‘cause again we don’t want to tell the student, like, ‘oh that’s wrong, that’s just completely wrong.’” Another aspect of balance described by a tutor was the desire to balance helping students end the session with a visibly improved piece of writing while also avoiding editing. This tutor said “I want to give them options, but if I can’t come up with options, then I feel stuck in terms of like ‘oh I can’t give them anything because maybe they’ll just take it and then we’re just editing their paper and not learning together.’” Similarly, another tutor noted that they struggle with “trying to find that line where, okay do we make the paper better here or do we answer their questions, and how, what benefits them more and what are they more open to doing?” In this case, the tutor found it challenging to balance students’ questions with the various grammatical and structural issues. Importantly, the same tutor noted that this challenge occurs with both multilingual students and other students, although the issue might “[stand] out more” with multilingual students. A third aspect of balance was the desire to improve multilingual students’ writing while leaving the paper with their distinctive voice. A tutor described such a situation, stating that one challenge in tutoring multilingual students is “finding a line between how much they need to do for the professor’s expectations to have it sound like a native English speaker and how much they can actually leave so they sound like themselves.” Overall, tutors juggled their goal of teaching writing skills with concerns regarding communication, editing, and the students’ personal writing voice.

Tutors also found it challenging to explain grammatical rules to students. For example, a tutor noted, “I try to always tell them that I’m going to focus on the clarity and that’s my goal for your writing, rather than focusing on the nit-picking, but when it comes down to actually explaining the rules, sometimes I struggle with that a bit.” While tutors were familiar with the rules of English grammar, it was the communication of those rules to students that was especially challenging. A tutor mentioned, “I feel like I have a good basic knowledge of ‘oh you’re using the wrong verb tense or here’ or things like that but sometimes there’s just harder things that I’m like ‘I don’t even know why that’s wrong necessarily.’” Tutors in this study sometimes found it difficult to reconcile their sense of a grammar error with an explanation that they could succinctly and clearly provide to the student during a tutoring session.

### **Tutor Perceptions on Skill Development: Benefits and Missed Opportunities**

The usefulness of the Lingbits sessions as a review or refresher of the participants’ existing knowledge was an important theme related to the effectiveness of the skill development

opportunities provided by the writing centre. One tutor commented, “the Lingbits were helpful in the fact that it kind of reinforced what we were learning.” However, another tutor suggested that Lingbits could be better utilized as a chance to cover practical elements of topics covered in the overall program of skill development, noting “...I think for me it almost might've been helpful if we covered a topic maybe in the extensive training and then did the Lingbits to review different aspects of that from a more practical side, or just to expand on them.” Similarly, one tutor indicated that they found the Lingbits to be both “helpful and then not helpful at the same time.” This tutor indicated that while the technical terminology taught during the Lingbits would not be helpful when working with students, the Lingbits were able to refresh the tutor's memory of various language concepts. The tutor noted, “I was able to relearn a lot of the concepts that were taught, and then it could help us like look up all that stuff, when we needed it...” Some tutors also felt the Lingbits sessions could have been enhanced if they had a solid foundation of initial knowledge. For example, one tutor said, “I thought they were really useful, but they needed to reinforce my learning, and I didn't have the learning bit first.” Similarly, tutors may have had difficulties applying the Lingbits information: “the Lingbits felt overwhelming at times, and also very technical and not like things that I was working on in appointments with students, but it could be also that because I didn't have that knowledge; that wasn't something I would work on in appointments with students.”

### **Technical Knowledge, Communication, and other Areas in Writing Consultations**

Some of the participants felt they were able to apply the knowledge they gained from the skill development opportunities with multilingual students to enhance the learning experience. For instance, several tutors noted that exercises on identifying the names for various writing errors were useful. One tutor indicated, “[naming the errors was helpful] like if I didn't know how to explain it, at least I knew the name, so I could look it up and find an explanation.” However, another tutor did mention, “I don't think that using that technical terminology for the student themselves would be super helpful, I don't think.”

Tutors also found exercises that improved their abilities to communicate with multilingual students applicable during tutoring sessions. One participant noted,

I learned a lot about how people, how there's different styles of communication and how some people are more direct and others are more indirect and kind of take their time to get to the point so, you might have to read a whole essay to find out what they're trying to communicate at the very end, and so that gave me more context or understanding in terms of reviewing people's work to kind of get a first look through it and skim everything to get [an] overall sense of what they're working on, what they're doing in their whole work, before I start just at the beginning like ‘this is missing, this doesn't make sense,’ but to just kind of take it all in and go from there.

Related to the same theme of communication, another tutor indicated that tutors sometimes struggle reading students' essays when they incorporate words from their primary language. The tutor said, “[the student] was using language that wasn't English in the paper to use quotes, or like names of things, that I couldn't pronounce, and I just had a little bit of trouble with doing that, because I didn't want him to feel like I wasn't being able to reiterate his essay back to him

properly.” In a similar vein of communication and perspective-taking skills, a tutor noted that it was useful to learn about the material that multilingual students cover in their English for academic purposes course. The tutor commented, “what I thought was really helpful...was that he actually went through like ‘this is something that [the EAL students have] seen, here’s how they saw it, and here’s the pattern that they know.’” Based on the data it seems that exercises that allowed tutors to develop stronger perspective-taking and communication skills were applied by tutors during sessions with multilingual students.

In relation to the provided online resources that tutors could use with multilingual students, the participants reported that the websites were only sometimes useful. One tutor commented generally that “I thought the websites were helpful for us as tutors, but ... it wasn’t something that I would always want to draw upon in an appointment.” There are several reasons why tutors did not use websites in appointments. In particular, one tutor noted that providing clients with examples they could incorporate into their writing was more useful during a short appointment than referring them to a website, stating “just especially with the half an hour appointments, you have such a limited amount of time, the student really wants to work on their writing, so if you can find examples to apply to their essay then I find those work best.” Furthermore, tutors noted that websites could contain more information than the student needed at that point, thus diluting their utility. The tutor indicated “...I would google and find like a website that explains the concept well and it wasn’t necessarily one of those websites that we had ... because it was just one page and it spoke to exactly what they needed, and I think that some of those websites would be a little bit overwhelming for what the student came in for.”

### **Discussion and Implications**

The growing number of domestic and international multilingual students studying at universities where English is the common language in Canada means that writing centre tutors are being increasingly called on to support students from a range of linguistic backgrounds. As a result, writing centre tutors can benefit from acquiring specialized skills to ensure they can help students from all linguistic backgrounds achieve their desired educational outcomes. The data from the current study indicate that the writing centre tutors in this study generally perceive specialized skill development on supporting multilingual students as useful to their practice. However, these supports are not equal in terms of their perceived value to the participants and their efficacy on their tutoring practice.

Regarding the impact of skill development on addressing tutors’ needs, the participants in this study often feel the need to help multilingual writers immediately fix their mistakes; however, the data also suggest that most of the multilingual students would like the tutors to assume a collaborative yet instructional role. Compared to a previous study in the same writing centre (Pilin et al., 2020), the participant responses in this current study appear to show growth in tutors’ willingness to take a more developmental approach to providing feedback. However, the participants’ comments suggested that tutors found helping students with their sentence-level writing and other concerns around flow and register while maintaining the students’ voices to be challenging. This finding may mean that writing centre tutors may require more support with negotiating agendas and strategies to achieve this balance. It appears that effective interaction could be a key component to scaffolding multilingual students visits to the writing centre (Thompson, 2009).

In addition, the participants reported on the value of having a knowledge of grammatical terminology. The tutors in this study appeared to regularly need to draw on this knowledge during their tutoring sessions. Previously, it had been found that tutors were challenged by teaching grammar and knowing how to explain grammar rules (Pilin et al., 2020). The participants' willingness in the current study to draw on components of the skill development program in their practice demonstrated some evidence of growth in their tutoring skills for working with multilingual students. In particular, the skill development offered by the writing centre appears to have given the participants a sense of expertise and empowered them to identify errors and conduct internet searches for suitable resources to aid the multilingual students in their practice.

Applying this knowledge to find websites and tools for multilingual students appeared to help the tutors deal with writing concerns. Tutors seemed to experience these benefits both *in situ* and after sessions by recommending self-study options to multilingual students visiting the writing centre. A further skill development support that could be established is an online space for tutors that would allow tutors to asynchronously share ideas and revisit material encountered online and during other skill development opportunities. This space could be hosted on a learning management system. Such a portal has been used at Purdue University writing centres, and the tutors who accessed those resources reported positive impacts on their practice and their ability to work with multilingual students (Kennell, 2014). A similar space could be created to host resources that student writers could use to work on the features of language that they find challenging in their own time. Such a tool might help free-up consultation time for dialogue while simultaneously providing an opportunity to contribute to a sense of community and appreciation for self-directed learning among tutors.

Regarding the usefulness of the skill development program in light of the tutors' perceived needs, the responses indicate that exercises which help build the knowledge of grammar were helpful. This knowledge appeared to help the participants pinpoint areas of confusion regarding these features of languages and empowered them to move beyond a prescribed list of websites. However, the participants expressed a need to develop their foundational knowledge of English grammar and other features of language on an ongoing basis. They appeared to place a high value on opportunities for ongoing review of the terminology. Previously, tutors have reported a desire to participate with other tutors in workshops and staff meetings (Pilin et al., 2020). The ongoing opportunities afforded by the Lingbits sessions to review features of language with their peers and draw on their existing knowledge and experiences seemed to have afforded these opportunities and have been perceived as the most beneficial component of the new program of skill development offered by the writing centre.

However, the participants' comments about their struggle to explain concepts implies that the skill development opportunities did not provide sufficient space for helping them develop a practical understanding of how to guide the learning of these features, nor did it seem to provide adequate instruction on how to guide multilingual students to incorporate these specific features of language into their composition. This finding reveals an ongoing desire to have a variety of instructional strategies for supporting multilingual students. Future incarnations of the skill development program would benefit from building tutors' knowledge of features of language and provide opportunities for tutors learn and apply different instructional approaches to help multilingual students notice and repair these features in their own writing if necessary. For example, tutors could be encouraged to incorporate elements of Ellis's (2009) typology of written corrective feedback or Willis's (2003) framework of noticing, system building, and exploration into their consultations to provide more flexibility in their instructional approach. These

instructional strategies could be introduced in initial skill development workshops and revisited at certain intervals during ongoing skill development opportunities. The participants also seemed to consider skill development related to intercultural communication and communication styles to be helpful to their practice. Writing centre tutors have previously acknowledged the importance of being able to communicate with culturally diverse groups of students (Pilin et al., 2020). The intercultural aspect of the skill development program appeared to help the tutors understand how multilingual students might articulate their message in their writing and during consultations.

A focus on intercultural awareness is consistent with calls from Moussu (2013) and Thonus (2014), who recommended a greater emphasis on intercultural interaction in skill development programs to aid tutors in their duties as linguistic and cultural informants. However, it bears accentuating that the participants felt more confident when they were familiar with the content, and they expressed a desire to better support multilingual students who incorporate their first or primary languages in their written compositions. Translanguaging approaches that make use of more than one language during a tutoring session hold promise for better supporting students as they draw on their full linguistic repertoires (Wei, 2018). Another implication of this desire to be better able to support multiple languages in use is the need for having a staff of tutors that is linguistically, culturally, and academically representative of the students that come to a writing centre to help ensure that students can meet with tutors who share similar linguistic, cultural, and academic experiences if they so desire (Rafoth, 2015). By having a staff of tutors that is linguistically, culturally, and academically representative of the students the centre is trying to support, this attention to diversity might help ensure that students can meet with tutors who share similar linguistic, cultural, and academic experiences.

## **Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions**

The current study used a focus group to garner tutor perceptions of their experiences in connection to the skill development opportunities in a writing centre and employed a qualitative thematic approach to analyze the collected data (Braun & Clark, 2006; Mills & Gay, 2016; Williams & Katz, 2001). Key themes were identified in relation to multilingual student expectations, tutoring challenges, skill development program effectiveness, and new skill applications. All in all, for the tutors in this study, the skill development program offered by the writing centre was beneficial to their practice and enhanced the teaching and learning experiences of multilingual students.

This study set out to provide a rich qualitative description of the tutors' perceptions related to working with multilingual students in a writing centre and the skill development opportunities offered by that writing centre. As such, these results only pertain to a particular group of writing centre students at a certain point in time, and generalizability is not typically the object of a qualitative study of this nature (Mills & Gay, 2016). However, a number of significant themes arising in the data demonstrate a degree of saturation with regard to the skill development opportunities offered in the writing centre where this study took place, and these themes may resonate with readers who are familiar with similar writing centres in other locations.

Based on the findings of the current study, future studies might want to explore the efficacy of different modes of skill development for writing centre tutors, such as the use of asynchronous online modules to further support in-person skill development sessions. Such studies could lend weight to the need for skill development alternatives that encourage on-going and self-directed tutor education. Future studies might also set out to capture and story what strategies tutors find

most successful when supporting multilingual students and determine what instructional strategies might be most suitable during writing centre appointments with multilingual students. The availability of such self narratives could provide a taxonomy of tutor strategies that can be shared with and applied by other tutors in similar contexts. Furthermore, the current study employed a focus group to explore the tutors' shared perceptions of the skill development program. In order to further understand tutor skill development for working with multilingual students, it may be useful to explore the perceptions of multilingual students themselves. For example, future studies might seek to conduct duoethnographic research on the experiences of both tutors and multilingual students on their respective development over the course of a series of skill development sessions and writing consultations. As highlighted by Eckstein (2019), studies of this sort can complement larger data-driven research by providing a nuanced understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and lived experiences of both writing centre tutors and their students.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Curated List of Websites for Tutors and Writers**

#### **Grammar Practice**

- University of Victoria English Language Centre Study Zone: Provides explanations and practice exercises for a variety of grammar points organized by level.
- Purdue OWL Grammar Exercises: A collection of common grammar points used in academic writing and exercises organized by themes (e.g. punctuation, sentence structure, and tense consistency).
- INTERACTIVE, Online Exercises: Exercises to help improve sentence structure (e.g. fragments, run-on sentences, and subject-verb agreement).

#### **Vocabulary Building**

- Using English for Academic Purposes (UEFAP): Academic Vocabulary and Exercises: Exercises with vocabulary from the academic word list used in context.
- British Council Word Family Framework: Use this website to find out the different word forms (e.g. publication, publicize, public, publically).
- BBC: Learning English: Improve your knowledge of English through news stories. This site provides a good mix of everyday English and grammar review.
- Quizlet: Create and print vocabulary flashcards with pictures.

#### **Academic Writing**

- Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL): The essential online resource for all questions regarding academic writing, including essay formats, academic writing style for different disciplines, grammar, and citation styles.
- Academic Phrasebank (University of Manchester): A collection of useful academic expressions organized by function that you can use to help write research reports and essays (e.g. comparing, describing statistics, and explaining causality).  
Using English for Academic Purposes (UEFAP) Writing Genres: An overview of the most common elements and writing genres found in academic writing. The overviews and exercises can help you organize your essay and reports.

## **Appendix B**

### **EAL Support Semi-Structured Focus Group Questions**

#### **Background of Participants**

- How long have you worked for the writing centre?
- What is your current program of study? What year are you in?
- What formal skills development have you completed related to teaching English as an additional language (EAL)?
- What informal skills development have you completed related to teaching EAL?
- What experience do you have living, studying, working, or travelling where the majority language was other than English?

#### **Tutoring Skills**

- What do you think is the biggest writing challenge for students using EAL?
- How confident are you in your ability to tutor students using EAL? Why?
- What aspects of EAL tutoring are you most comfortable with? Provide an example.
- What aspects of EAL tutoring challenge you the most? Provide an example.
- What expectations do you think students using EAL have when entering a tutoring session? How prepared do you feel to meet those expectations?
- How would you describe your role as a tutor working with students using EAL? Is it any different than your role tutoring students from English speaking backgrounds?

#### **Skills Development**

- How effective did you find the skills development opportunities held this year to help you work with EAL students? Discuss:
  - o Lingbits training sessions
  - o Websites
  - o Workshops
- Which type of skills development offerings did you find most useful (see above for types of skills development)?
- Have you been able to implement anything you learned in the skills development opportunities in your tutoring sessions with EAL students? Can you give us an example?
- What's missing from the skills development in the writing centre? Is there something you were hoping to learn in specific to tutoring EAL students that was not covered in our skills development sessions?
- Have you accessed the resources you have been given to help you work with EAL students (i.e. websites)? How often? Which have been the most useful?

#### **Future Skills Development**

- In addition to what is currently available, what other resources would you like to have to support writing consultants working with students using EAL?

#### **Further Thoughts**

- Do you have anything else you would like to share with the researchers related to tutoring students using EAL in the writing centre?