

## *Original Paper*

# Challenges and Changes: The Development of an English Writing Center in Taiwan (Note 1)

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper explains the process of a group from a regional public university in Texas, USA attempting a short-term project to start a writing center at a private technical university in Taiwan. The group encountered several challenges and this paper attempts to reflect on and analyze what happened and to assist others who may have similar plans. Writing centers are growing in Asia but may need a different approach than just transplanting a US approach uncritically. Also cultural knowledge is key in endeavoring to re-establish a current concept in a new context.*

### ***Keywords***

*writing centers, Taiwan, second language writing, cultural exchange*

### **1. Introduction**

In winter 2012, senior English majors from a private university of science and technology in Taiwan visited the U.S. to conduct Mandarin classes. In return, our group planned to travel to Taiwan to engage in various projects as part of a cultural and educational exchange. Epley was going to start a writing center with the help of another participant. The other participant was an experienced tutor who had planned to help with tutor training and to establish a writing center. Epley planned to research and document the experience as part of a course project, keeping a journal of her experiences and to asking the tutors to do the same so as to develop a methodology for implementing said writing center. Babcock was to supervise and assist in training, advertise writing center services, and monitor student-tutor interactions; and Linnenkugel was to conduct conversation practice and assist as needed. In this effort

we encountered several hurdles: Epley became trainer after the experienced instructor withdrew from the project, but she soon became ill, so Babcock conducted the training with Linnenkugel. Epley planned to stay for a month, but her illness forced an early departure, so Linnenkugel assumed the writing center duties in addition to English conversation practice. Here we share our experiences for other groups considering similar projects, as well as suggestions for academics in pursuit of establishing English-Language writing centers.

### *1.1 Background*

Writing Centers in Asia are not a new idea. Tzu-Shan Chang notes the first writing center in Taiwan began in 2000, and currently The Writing Center Directory lists nine writing centers in Taiwan. Writing centers in Taiwan in particular and Asia in general often focus not only on writing, but also on second language skills, application essays, and test preparation. They may have faculty rather than peer tutors, although this is not a general rule. Asian writing centers specifically are more likely to be bilingual than American writing centers which are almost always monolingual (Chang).

## **2. Observations and Challenges**

### *2.1 Educational Context*

Our efforts to initiate a writing center began with struggles in trained personnel, as one person dropped out of the program and another fell ill. While this caused necessary adjustments within the project, there were also educational contexts that affected our plans. The host university is a technical university that attracts students who have attended vocational high schools rather than college preparatory programs. It may even seem strange to some, as it did to one reviewer of this article, that there would even be English majors at a technological university. In response to this, our host explained (Note 2):

There may be three main reasons that students study in the English department in this university. That is, they have been interested in English since they were young; compared with other departments, the requirements in the English program are not as demanding; or they failed to get into other programs they had intended to. In general, students who are interested in English will have motivation and work hard at school and may choose jobs related to English after graduating, such as work in private English cram schools, as a private English tutor, or English secretaries. The other two groups who are not serious on their study usually take jobs totally irrelevant to English. It's getting hard to recruit students to enter the English program lately because of the oversupply in universities and birthrate decline in Taiwan. Thus, in the program, some freshman students we recruit may only know English alphabetic letters.

When asked if this is typical of all university study in Taiwan our host answered,

it depends on students' learning attitudes and their level of academic performance and faculty members' professional teaching quality. In my personal opinion, it is not typical of all university study in Taiwan. In many good universities in Taiwan, students may have better learning attitudes, they may want to earn more knowledge they didn't know before, especially for the good students.

They may challenge their teachers' ability. In this, their teachers need to work harder and become more professional. Why did I say this? Because it's hardly seen in [this university], especially in the English program.

This relates to a question from one of our reviewers who wanted to know if most students come to university knowing or not knowing (spoken/written) English, and if this university is the norm or the exception. Our host answered:

I think most students know English when they come to university since English language instruction starts in elementary school. Because it is a monolingual setting in Taiwan, students have less opportunity to practice their English outside English classes so they become unfamiliar with English when they seldom use it. I mentioned previously that the university I'm talking about has recruited not top students, so their (spoken/written) English may not be the norm.

One reviewer of this article also wanted to know if these students would go abroad or enter grad school. Our host answered, "As far as I know, it seems that no students ever went abroad for study but a few students would go working holidays in Australia in the past. Less than 10 students entered graduate schools and only one of them is working on her doctoral degree currently in Taiwan". One of the Taiwanese students in the 2016 cultural exchange group who visited Texas to teach Mandarin Chinese does want to pursue a Master's degree in the US. As to why they need to learn English, another question asked by a reviewer of this article, our host is not sure. She did explain:

To me, I'm interested in languages so I entered English program and have a job related to English. I don't know exactly why students need to learn English. Because I think if I'm interested in English, I will study hard to work on it. However, many students in this program do not study hard enough. In addition, some of them have confidence on their English ability and think they are better than other students.

Babcock interviewed four Taiwanese exchange participants from this school who were visiting Texas to teach Mandarin and asked this same question. Three of the four wanted to learn English in order to teach in a cram school. The third wants a career in design and English is required for this career.

## 2.2 Classroom Context

The classroom environment in Taiwan was different than the US context. In addition to the courses of English Conversation and English Writing with small class sizes of around 20 to 25 students, the numbers of students in Taiwanese classes are usually about 35 to 50. Our host reported a class with 57 students. Rather than demanding complete silence and attention, professors tolerated students talking (in Chinese), texting, and behaving in what we perceived as a distracting manner during class. Other scholars have noted the same trends in China and other universities in Taiwan. Antonio Molina Rivas noted on an educational exchange program to China, that he observed "students who wanted to text would sit in the back row, and the instructor would only lecture. The classroom arrangement was boring".

We thought a writing/conversation center would give motivated students a chance to practice English in

a supportive academic environment, but Linnenkugel observed what he perceived as a lack of student motivation and classroom environments not conducive to developing reluctant students' English abilities. He observed no stigma associated with students' extremely limited English abilities. Many teachers spoke mostly Chinese in English classes; few regularly spoke English. Students who didn't fully understand English were not at a disadvantage because of the small amount of English required by most teachers. One reviewer asked how much English-based instruction is typical in Taiwanese universities. Our host wanted to clarify if English-based instruction meant "English medium instruction (EMI). Most English programs in Taiwanese universities conduct their courses through EMI. Some non-English graduate programs may also apply EMI. ...In my program, some Taiwanese faculty members may conduct their classes in English. In this, some students may like them, and other students cannot understand the classes well and suffer from taking them". This again reiterates the unique challenge faced in our study as we strove to find a way to bridge the learning gap.

Challenges to the writing center included students who appeared to be very shy in practicing English. More than shyness may be involved, though. Xia Wang states that "Asians tend to consider a talker suspicious or foolish" (p. 13) (One reviewer commented that Asian students who come to the U.S. to study as international students don't display this reluctance to talk with tutors). Other challenges included students' part-time jobs and students favoring free time over the writing center. During writing center or conversation practice times, numerous students ate or visited with friends rather than doing school work. Students who volunteered to learn how to tutor seemed uninterested in meeting more than three hours per week for training. Some tutors had other obligations like work or family. Babcock suggested that the tutors be paid, but the Taiwanese host rejected this idea.

Lack of attendance became an issue, even after changing the writing center schedule to better match students' availability and "advertising" the writing center services to raise awareness of a place where students could get help. Linnenkugel's final week was the most active. He thought that students avoided the activities because of shyness and he confirmed his hypothesis by speaking with them. He asked the students who suddenly started to appear why they waited so long, and they said they wanted to practice their English before he left, and since they saw their time running out, they had to overcome their nervousness and talk to him. In general, the total students that attended the workshops and lunch meetings were around 25 or so, but probably only 10 really talked and the rest listened. He asked questions to about 10-15 people, usually about perceived differences in cultures, and questions that they had about things that they heard/seen/were told about America. Most of these were the ones that spoke to him in English and some others spoke through interpreters. Most said they were nervous to attempt their English with a native speaker, but with reassurance from Linnenkugel, some warmed to the idea of practicing in English.

### *2.3 Culture*

Students sometimes claimed to know less English than they actually did, and people skilled in English apologized for their poor English. Chinese/Taiwanese culture values humility, which was perplexing

for American participants. The Chinese cultural value of self-deprecation often leads speakers to lessen their estimation of self and dismiss their confidence on academics or appearance (A.-H. Chen). In a study of Taiwanese and American e-pals, Chi-Yang, a Taiwanese participant, not only complimented her e-pal, but also “degraded” her English. Chi-Yang wrote, “Sorry, my English isn’t good enough”, and “I am a little nervous because of my poor English”. Ming-Hui, another Taiwanese participant, indicated, “Hope I have given you the answers you want (with my poor English)”. In Chinese social and academic settings, people understand this as a politeness formula despite its inaccurate reflection of their skills. This information will be useful to those Americans who will be doing any kind of project in Taiwan or China.

It is a commonplace that Asian culture is more collective and western culture is more individualist, and we discovered that people had to be consulted about any plan of action before it was carried out. To our detriment, we came with ideas already formed and neglected consultation. Perhaps the first year should have consisted of interviews and needs assessment and then based on this canvassing, a more effective approach to the implementation of the writing center would have been developed.

As to whether there was a cultural reason that Taiwanese students were hesitant to seek help from a writing center, Linnenkugel does not see one besides shyness and indolence (or valuing one’s free time). But what an American perceives as shyness could be a cultural staple that Asians show that Americans typically don’t (Wang, p. 12). Part-time jobs and social media take time and distract students’ attention from studying. Students prefer speaking over writing and need more time for writing but have little patience for it. Another explanation why students might not have wanted to seek help from outsiders is the Chinese concept of *Guanxi*. *Guanxi* values in-group relationships over out-group ones. This might be an explanation of why the students chose to interact with each other rather than Linnenkugel. This concept would value current, ongoing relationships over new ones or those with strangers (Chen, G.-M). One way that this informs our understanding of a more effective approach to working with students is to work towards developing a one-on-one friendship with students before trying to take on a role as a tutor to the student.

Sometimes cultural hindrances prevent students from seeking help. In many Asian cultures it is shameful to show ignorance or lack of understanding and ask for additional explanation. In *ESL Writers*, Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth explain for some students, “asking for help is actually a cultural taboo” (p. 33). Pierre Ostrowski and Gwen Penner, in a book about Chinese culture, write that not being able to do something, or not knowing something, especially not being able to speak English, can cause someone to lose face (pp. 66-67). As with any writing center, we needed to promote the benefits of participation and explain there is no shame in coming for tutoring sessions or extra practice. A writing center is useless if students feel it culturally unacceptable to seek help there. However, several writing centers across Asia successfully blend theoretical and cultural aspects examined here to approach their students in a more successful way. This shows that the structure for writing centers in Taiwan should first focus on making students feel it is a safe place where they will not be judged or criticized.

Culture may not be the only issue. Students may not object to seek help from the writing center, but because the tutors were trained quickly and not entirely familiar with the needed tutoring skills, perhaps the students were uncomfortable. And, since it was their first experience with a writing center, both faculty and students were not accustomed to it. This indicates a need for longer involvement and ongoing support for the center and its tutors.

Another issue is that students took their English studies into their own hands outside the classroom. The students seem to have a very self-centered focus to learning, as they would rather improve their own skills than spend free time helping those who struggle. However, as other writing centers have discovered; the tutor can benefit as much as the learner in these situations and the benefits (learning content more deeply, developing self-confidence and self-esteem, honing teaching techniques) should be pointed out to the potential tutors (Miciano).

## 2.4 Lessons Learned

### 2.4.1 Educational Aspects

All students are different and we shouldn't stereotype American or Taiwanese/Chinese students. We did notice several problems that cause serious issues in the effectiveness of a newly developed writing center which largely stem from inadequate initial research into student needs, cultural and social behavior, and effective communication. Based on research and interpreting data from students and our notes, we have worked toward simple solutions.

The main problem was language. Although we had studied Chinese, our language skills were poor. Therefore all instruction on writing center activities was conducted in English. Linnenkugel struggled to make tutors fully understand their tasks, partly because he was thrust into the position without full preparation. Even though the textbook (*The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*) explained how to tutor, tutors had a hard time fully understanding how to help students. They asked a lot of questions, sometimes repeating them, and sometimes not fully understanding the answers. The initial training lasted three days and there were five tutors. Babcock and Linnenkugel conducted the training using a traditional classroom format based on the material found in *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. One suggestion is to make the training longer.

Another method we tried to draw students into the writing center was sending the tutors into the English classrooms. This way, students could work with the tutors in a comfortable setting and learn some basic steps they could later build on when they visited the actual writing center. Through the classroom, the writing center tutors established a rapport with students, and could help students who have questions. Linnenkugel believes the classroom work was helpful. The ones who were helped by the tutors in the classroom seemed to be more likely to come to the writing center.

### 2.5 Cultural Issues

Clearly students, faculty and staff should be consulted before a program is established. However, the concept of *face* must also be taken into account. According to Ostrowski and Penner, Chinese people will not say "No" since it will cause the other person to lose face (p. 63), or they even may tell lies to

preserve face (p. 65). Potential writing center establishers should understand that “yes” may not mean “yes” but might be a way of being polite: “In short, ‘yes’ may mean ‘yes’, ‘no’, or nothing” (Wang 13). One solution to this issue would be to have a student repeat a concept back to a tutor or explain in their own words. This type of active learning better facilitates engagement and demonstrates the student’s understanding rather than a simple “yes” or “no” question might.

### *2.6 Creating a Student-Centered Program*

The writing center could offer more culturally-friendly alternatives to traditional tutoring sessions such as small conversational groups. Janet Moser found same-culture small groups more effective for some students than traditional one-on-one tutoring. In training Babcock stressed that research confirms it is OK to tutor an English paper in Chinese if both participants were more comfortable in that language (Cumming and So). For tutees who prefer to converse in English, facilitating students to speak English amongst small groups of their peers opposed to a full-sized classroom setting might be advantageous. This type of session builds competence, as well as confidence, so students become more active in the classroom and beyond. Within the writing center, tutors and students can focus on the issues which differ from student to student. As Judith Powers explains, “determining what assistance the writers needed through a series of questions about process and problems, purpose and audience ... would allow us to lead writers to the solution of their own problems” (p. 40). Students need practice to improve their skills, but they also want more from their English classes.

A writing center could add to students’ overall English education since students want less classroom-type instruction, but still want to learn English for themselves and their future careers. Gi-Zen Liu documents that “according to a Taiwanese government-sponsored research report... most non-English-major freshmen think English is important for them; however, they would prefer fewer class hours of ‘University English’ than they are required to take” (p. 212). A writing center is just the place for this type of learning to satisfy students’ wants and needs. Also, “it appears that the majority of non-English-major freshmen in Taiwan prefer more class hours and opportunities for listening and speaking, but fewer class hours for reading and writing in their EFL classrooms” (p. 213). Students want more time conversing and practicing, and the writing/conversation center can facilitate that process. They want to learn to speak English, and how to better accomplish that than in small conversation groups and one-on-one sessions with a trained tutor? Liu goes on to say that:

most Taiwanese students are aware of the importance of balanced development of their English ability in order to compete with other students in this American English- and technology-dominated global village. On the other hand, most Taiwanese students do not feel comfortable speaking English frequently in class (pp. 214-215).

Students must be made comfortable in English conversation, and the writing center can serve as a middle-ground between student and classroom. The writing center can act as a bridge, easing students into a more active role, as teachers and tutors work side by side to bridge the gap to confidence in English.

After working in Taiwan, Linnenkugel thinks that we need to plan a different program due to the lack of response from students. We are not sure what program should replace the writing center, but in our experience students were extremely hesitant to have other people help them in their writing processes. However, one month is not enough time to establish a writing center and change the culture of writing on a campus. Three days of training by an unprepared trainer is also not ideal. Perhaps future American students could act as tutors and phase in peer tutors slowly, once the idea of the writing center caught hold.

### 3. Conclusion

Engaging in this project with the Taiwanese students offered valuable learning opportunities which will inform future writing center and tutoring projects. While they were all very nice, it was difficult to get them to want to improve their English skills and challenging to get them to participate actively. Near the end of the month student visits increased but the same students showed up and did most of the talking. As for the American exchange visitors, our host thinks that they need to be well prepared, be really interested in cross-cultural experiences, and have a “tough mind”.

A writing center or classroom supplement would be beneficial for students taking an intensive English course in Taiwan. We can take advantage of this need for more assistance and offer students the support of a writing center and related services. Though we faced hurdles, many challenges served as learning opportunities to better the program for a future team. Looking back, Babcock thought we should have gotten input before deciding on a course of action, especially out of respect to the collective culture. Perhaps the first year should have consisted of interviews and needs assessment. Instead, we assumed their needs and forced our ideas on them. Although our plan was largely based on research about other Asian writing centers and Taiwanese culture, we learned that just like individual students that come into the writing center are all different, each context has its own specific culture and needs. Since successful writing centers thrive in Taiwan and particular and Asia in general, we could visit these centers or correspond with their directors. Now that we have begun to investigate what students need and want from a writing center, we can customize a better suited plan, beginning with communication. Communication is needed to supply what students want while keeping in mind cultural differences. Hopefully through time and concentrated effort, students will become more open to using the center as a place for growth and refining skills. We believe that writing is a collaborative act, no matter the culture, and every institution has a place for some kind of writing center. However, the form that writing center takes and how quickly or slowly it is established ultimately depends on the context.

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## Notes

Note 1. Thanks to Babcock's Spring 2016 Composition II class for helpful feedback.

Note 2. I have lightly edited our host's responses for idiomatic English.