Directive and Nondirective Tutoring in Writing Centers and Korean Writing Center Training

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to enhance the understanding of nondirective and directive tutoring associated with writing programs of writing center. In this paper, extensive literature review was made on the discourse concerning nondirective tutoring, directive tutoring, and second language (L2) writer tutoring. This research is aligned with many researches that suggests the need to balance nondirective and directive methods of tutoring. In practice, writing centers tend to use nondirective tutoring approach extensively. However, the importance of balancing it with directive approach should not be ignored. The two main complementary features of nondirective approach are the high level of social interaction it allows and the convenience in evaluating students' level of understanding and limitations by constantly asking questions to students. The main complementary feature of directive approach would be providing students a 'model' writing especially for beginners and especially for L2 writers. Also, this paper examined Yonsei university writing center's tutor training and concluded that Korean writing centers also favor nondirective method excessively and needs to accommodate directive tutoring in their writing center tutor discipline.

Keywords: writing centers in Korea, directive approach, nondirective approach, nondirective tutoring and scaffolding

1. Introduction

Corbett’s article conducts a rhetorical analysis of the previous literature on directive/nondirective tutoring methods and considers diverse approaches to writing tutelage[1]. The main purpose of Corbett’s article is to suggest useful pedagogical methods for all teachers of writing. Corbett purposes the term course-based tutoring (CBT) to incorporate the overlapping elements shared between curriculum based tutoring, usually associated with writing fellows programs, and classroom based tutoring, where tutoring is offered during class. According to Corbett, writing centers have mainly provided the curriculum based tutoring but they are now incorporating classroom based tutoring as well. The two types of tutoring are now coexisting in the writing center and are put into a single term by Corbett as course-based tutoring (CBT). In other words, CBT describes the grey area of curriculum based tutoring and

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classroom based tutoring. Writing centers now provide both non-evaluative, marginal, and one-on-one only tutoring style as well as a more new and diverse styles such as peer tutoring, writing fellow, supplemental instruction, writing groups, and in-class daily tutor. Such changes demand "a close reconsideration of typically nondirective, hands-off approach to tutoring".

2. Literature Review

2.1 nondirective approach vs directive approach

According to Corbett, the writing center’s orthodox approach in tutoring has been the nondirective approach. By looking at the major literature (such as Clark and Healy[2]; Evelyn Ashton Jones[3]), Corbett gives possible relational and political reasons for the dominance of the nondirective approach in the writing center: tutors’ avoidance to be “shaman, guru, or mentor” fear of plagiarism, the idea of intellectual property rights, and the precarious status of writing centers in the university. He continues to introduce other studies that expresses concern for blind commitment to nondirective tutoring methods (such as Peter Carino[4]; Barbara Little Liu and Holly Mandes[5]) and emphasizes the need to see both directive/non-directive approaches as important and to practice instructional flexibility which is the very conclusion of his article. This conclusion is supported by his own research where he used two case studies involving two different models of CBT in a first year composition course.

The two models employed in this study were the directive tutoring method used by in-class tutor named Madeleine, and nondirective tutoring method of writing advisor named Sam. Simply put, the former case model showed features of the directive approach whereas the latter showed those of the nondirective approach. In the tutorial transcripts, Madeleine (featuring directive tutoring) displays almost “lecture like fashion” conversation interrupting in mid-sentence and speaking much more than the tutee. Furthermore, she rarely praises student efforts. Sam (featuring nondirective tutoring), showcases mainly the nondirective attitude in her tutorial sessions. She carefully listens and takes notes, asks a lot of open-ended questions, and gives enough time for students to respond. She also frequently praises the students’ effort.

While the two very different tutors show substantially different attitudes in their tutoring, Corbett qualifies them both as helpful. Corbett argues that Madeleine (featuring directive tutoring) “may have provided students with important (directive) salutary instruction for emulation via her passionate modeling of academic discourse, especially in the classroom” (“Negotiating Pedagogical Authorities” 93). On the other hand, Sam (featuring nondirective
tutoring) “provided valuable instruction via her (more nondirective) interactions during one-to-one tutorials” (“Negotiating Pedagogical Authorities” 94). In this respect, Corbett acknowledges the value in both directive/nondirective approach and encourages writing centers as well all teachers of writing to come out of lopsided theory and practice.

Throughout this article, Corbett encourages writing centers to reevaluate their nondirective heritage. The reason behind his encouragement is not because nondirective method lacks educational benefits. However, the article focuses mainly on the political and hierarchical status issues for the birth of nondirective heritage while mentioning no pedagogical and theoretical reasons for choosing the nondirective approach.

Making a more pedagogically and theoretically sound reasons why writing centers favored nondirective approach and why it nondirective approach has the capacity to facilitate student’s growth is one of this article’s aims. To better understand the pedagogical and theoretical explanation for nondirective method, Vygotsky’s ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) and Sadhana Puntambekar and Roland Hübscher’s categorization of "scaffolding" will be used for analyzing nondirective approach. Likewise, the pedagogical effectiveness of directive method in writing tutoring would be provided in this article.

2.2 Nondirective approach and Scaffolding

The nondirective approach sees teachers as facilitators rather than as controllers or directors. This view is shared with psychologist Vygotsky. Vygotsky’s most famous and popular concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)[6]. Its value lies in the fact that it frames the student learning in terms of “growth.” He claims that a student’s potential intellectual growth can be better marked by their aided accomplishments than un-aided accomplishments. Vygotsky defines ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86). Similar to Vygotsky’s concept, there is a closely relatable concept called scaffolding. As a pedagogical term, “scaffolding” is defined as a process that "enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (Wood, et al. 90)[7]. In other words, in order to reach the students’ highest zone of proximal development, tutors should serve as a scaffolding assistance.

Sadhana Puntambekar and Roland Hübscher summarized the scaffolding’s key features into four parts: intersubjectivity, ongoing diagnosis, dialogic and interactive, and fading[8].
“Intersubjectivity” is the combined ownership of the task acquired by teacher’s and the student’s collaborative redefinition of the task. “Ongoing diagnosis” and “dialogic and interactive” are processes in which the expert (or the tutor) gauges student’s appropriate level at which to engage the student. In “fading”, “there is a transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the learner and the scaffolding can be removed, as the learner moves toward independent activity”. It is the point when student has grasped the balance and direction so that “there is a transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the learner and the scaffolding can be removed, as the learner moves toward independent activity (Puntambekar and Hübscher 3).

These features of scaffolding are similar with those of non-directive approach. By examining Sam (featuring nondirective tutoring), we can identify scaffolding (un)intentionally happening. According to Corbett, Sam asked only 21 directive questions but asked 137 open ended questions and 20 content-clarifying questions during eleven tutoring sessions (Corbett, “Using Case Study” 72-73[9]). It is unlikely that the student would have taken the questions as a threat to his ownership of the paper. The tutee’s sense of ownership is a key facilitator for intersubjectivity and collaborative work between the tutor and the tutee. In this manner, non-directive approach can promote intersubjectivity. By using questions and allowing enough time so that students can process and respond like Sam, the tutor can easily check the tutee’s comprehension level and diagnose the problems tutee’s have. Sam’s nondirective questioning naturally started scaffolding process since scaffolding starts with checking and diagnosing students’ comprehension level. The minimal but collaborative nature of nondirective approach seems to show the possibility of achieving ideal scaffolding which could have been the theoretical reason behind the writing center’s long dedication to this approach.

2.3 Effectiveness or necessity of directive tutoring

While the writing center’s orthodoxy tends to favor a nondirective method and minimalist approach in tutoring, some theorists such as Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns[10] express reservation towards this methodologies. They believe that directive method can be just as effective, if not more so, than the nondirective approach because it models the normal and ideal discourse for the writer. In other words, once students are shown what is the discourse expectations of a particular knowledge community (such as academic writing), they will be able to express themselves more effectively because they have a better understanding of the goals and a rubric of what they are aiming toward:

Directive tutoring displays rhetorical processes in action. When a tutor redrafts problematic portions of a text for a student, the changes usually strengthen the disciplinary argument
and improve the connection to current conversation in the discipline . . . Thus, directive tutoring provides interpretive options for students when none seem available, and it unmasks the system of argumentation at work within a discipline. (Shamoon & Burns 237).

Writing center pedagogy and inquiry has been in the field of academia since the 1980s. There was Muriel Harris’s Teaching One-on-One (1986)[11] and Stephen North’s [12] call for serious writing center research to produce better writers rather than better papers. Currently there are lively research community as well as two dedicated journals: Writing Center Journal and Writing Lab Newsletter. Within the studies on writing centers, the topic of second language (L2) writers using writing centers have received much attention since the increased influx of international students in English speaking countries (Harris & Silva [13]; Powers [14]; Thonus [15]). These articles noted the various aspects of writing center pedagogy concerning second language writers. The awareness these articles provided were related to the cross-cultural differences in interaction and discourse as well as typical second language students’ errors and difficulties they encounter in reading and writing. Most importantly, these articles all addressed how tutorials with second language writers might require a more flexible approach to tutoring than was promoted for native speakers. For this flexibility, it required a coexistence of directive tutoring and nondirective tutoring.

The standard writing center theory was grounded and rooted in nondirective method. Its practice is asking many questions as a primary method and encouraging writers to figure out on their own. In other words, tutors are generally instructed not to tell explicitly how to change students’ texts. Rather, tutors are taught to use leading questions to help writers formulate their own effective revision. Judith Powers [14] questioned this standard practice of nondirective tutoring, especially for second language writers. She denoted that the tutors are to act as a cultural informants and explain how educational practices and academic expectations may differ from those with which the second language writers are accustomed to. "In general, tutors appear more willing to take on authoritative roles with L2 writers (Williams & Severino 169)" because for one, L2 writers voice their wish to tutors to take on the authoritative role and second, tutors felt the need to ease the processing load of L2 writers. For L2 writers, it is a more heavy processing load than native speakers to read, write, and monitor both higher order concerns (contents, logical flow, direction etc) and lower order concerns (grammar, spelling, etc).

2.4 Using both approaches and Writing center disciplinary in Korea
The taboo of directive approach in writing tutoring has been alleviated since the benefits of directive approach has been recognized. The flexibility to use both approaches have been suggested by many studies (Shamoon & Burns[10]; Cogie[11]; Kim[12]). The most important benefit of directive approach would be modeling writing which is especially helpful for beginners. Writing tutoring in Korea has relatively short history and have followed the examples of writing tutoring in other countries. This caused English writing centers in Korean universities to also recommend nondirective methods. Most of students who use writing centers are undergraduate students in beginner level. Restricting the use of directive tutoring may not be always helpful for beginner level students. In this respect, Korean writing centers should have balanced opinions of directive and nondirective approach. In this article, tutors working in Yonsei University writing center have been asked about their thoughts on directive/nondirective approach. Some of these questions were: 1) Did the writing center emphasize nondirective approach or directive approach, or both? 2) When do you think the student needs directive tutoring? 3) Would you like a more explicit discipline on affective directive tutoring?

Yonsei University writing center, called CETS (College English Tutoring Service), was established in October, 2007. It has a history of ten years and is used by undergraduate students. Yonsei CETS is authorized by United State’s College Reading & Learning Association and is approved as one of its international tutor discipline program. Yonsei CETS states its aims as facilitating and enhancing writers’ critical thinking, writing skills, and to become a better writer. It also states that proofreading or revising is not part of what CETS is for. As an authorized tutor discipline program by the College Reading & Learning Association, Yonsei provides its tutor discipline workshops that needs to be taken in order to be certified as tutors in CETS. In this article, certified tutors have been asked about their thoughts on directive/nondirective approach.

Seven tutors answered the survey. For the question "Did the writing center tutor education emphasize Non-directive method, Directive method or both?" four answered both and 2 answered nondirective method, and one answered directive method. The interpretation of the word ‘emphasized’ in the questioned may have differed because ‘emphasized’ does not necessarily mean ‘favored’. When asked again about what the tutor discipline workshops favored, most of the tutors answered nondirective method was favored. They said that they did talk a lot about directive approach as well, since students tend to prefer directive approach and a majority of the students only cares about grammatical corrections. In this respect, tutors were advised to avoid directive approach much as possible.

For the question "From your experience, do you feel like directive tutoring can be more
helpful in some occasions?", all of the tutors answered 'yes'. Asked when they feel like the students need directive tutoring, three of them said if the students were low-level English learners, directive tutoring seemed to be a better choice. Overall, tutors stated that they think grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and punctuation corrections are better suited for directive approach rather than nondirective approach.

In response to the question "Would you like discipline in effective directive tutoring skills? two answered 5='very much', two answered 4='much needed', two answered 3='yes I want some', and one answered 2= 'maybe a little' but none of them answered 1, which was 'not at all'. This means that the tutors did see the need for directive approach even when the writing centers' tutor discipline workshops all advised them to adhere to the nondirective approach. To perform directive tutoring most effectively and flexibly, all the tutors agreed that they would benefit from more balanced discipline in effective ways of directive tutoring.

3. Discussion

Based on Corbett’s “Negotiating Pedagogical Authority: The Rhetoric of Writing Center Tutoring Styles and Methods,” this article aimed at providing a scholarly and pedagogical theory for writing centers’ favoritism towards the nondirective approach. This article discusses the zone of proximal development (ZPD) complemented by scaffolding theory and how these two theories can be complemented by nondirective approach. The two main complementary features of nondirective approach are the high level of social interaction (student language is active) it allows and the convenience in evaluating students’ level of understanding and limitations by constantly asking questions to students. In addition, Corbett points out, “writing center practitioners-like many writing teachers-have perhaps played the blame game too often and for too long, resulting in lopsided theory and practice” (“Negotiating Pedagogical Authorities” 94). Like Corbett, studies have stressed the importance of escaping the lopsided theory and balancing directive and nondirective approach and using both approaches according to students’ level. However, Korean university writing centers adopted the tradition of nondirective tutoring. Yonsei university writing center tutors have answered that nondirective approach was greatly emphasized while directive approach was told to be avoided. They also noted that they face many instances when directive tutoring seems to be the best method. For instance, the level of the students as well as the technical errors, such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuations, were suggested as those instances when tutors felt directive approach is more helpful. To conclude, Korean university writing centers would need to
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provide helpful training in how and when to use directive method for writing. Also, condemning directive tutoring should not be practiced in writing centers. The Korean writing centers should embrace the directive tutoring as well as nondirective tutoring so that tutors will not feel guilty or put down when using directive tutoring and flexibly use both of these tutoring methods that matches the situation.

References


