

## What makes a Successful Tutorial? Tutors' and Tutees' Perceptions of Successful Writing Centre Tutorial<sup>1</sup>

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This case study qualitatively investigated tutors' and tutees' perceptions of successful tutorials through questionnaire and interview evaluation at an English as a foreign language writing centre in Japan. Participants were six tutoring pairs who were asked to answer Thompson's (2010) questionnaires on the writing centre tutorial they engaged in and were interviewed based on their responses. The results showed that tutors perceived tutorial success in terms of their contribution as a tutor, including whether they addressed the students' needs during a session or adequately answered the students' questions. Additionally, some tutors also defined tutorial success in terms of their student's development as a writer. On the other hand, the key factors that contributed to tutees' perceptions of tutorial success included satisfaction with their session, satisfaction with their revised paper, and their writing development.

本稿は、日本の大学における英語ライティング・センターにおいて、チュートリアル成功がチューターと利用者である学生にどのように捉えられているかについて調査した事例研究である。本研究では、6組のチューターと学生の参加協力を得て、Thompson (2010)の質問紙調査及びその結果に関するインタビュー調査を実施した。インタビュー調査で得られたチューターと学生からのコメントを質的に分析し、チューターと学生それぞれが考えるチュートリアルの成功に影響を与えうる要因を探った。調査の結果、チューターは、主として「チューターとしての貢献度」と「学生の書き手としての成長」の2つの視点からチュートリアルの成功を捉えていることがわかった。一方、学生に関しては、「チュートリアルに対する満足度」「チュートリアル後に修正した原稿に対する満足度」「ライティング力の向上」といった3つの要因がチュートリアルの成功に影響を与えていることが明らかとなった。

*Keywords:* writing centre, successful tutorials, tutorial success, tutors, EFL writers

### 1. Introduction

With the advancement of our globalized and information society, academic writing skills have become more essential than ever. In order to deal with the accelerated needs for transmission of information, fostering students' academic writing skills is one of the

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urgent issues to work on at universities. Under these circumstances, the number of writing centres in Japanese universities has gradually increased in recent years. Writing centres typically provide one-on-one tutorial sessions on students' writing beyond the regular curriculum. Tutors at these centres are mostly graduate students with specialized training in teaching and tutoring academic writing including lectures on writing centre theory and practice, workshop, tutorial observation, and training sessions. Writing centres, which originated in the U.S. in 1930s, were initially established to help first language (L1) English writers (Carino, 2002; Carter-Tod, 1995). With the increased number of international students and immigrants in the early 1990s, writing centres now play an additional role in helping second language (L2) English writers (Carino, 2002). Today, in the U.S., most major universities have their own writing centres. In Japan, the first writing centres were established in 2004. As of 2018, the number of Japanese universities and colleges with established writing centres has increased to nearly 30. There is a great deal of diversity in the types of writing centres in Japan and each writing centre attempts to offer writing support that matches the needs of their university and students.

Based on the philosophy of “producing better writers, not better writing” (North, 1984, p. 438), writing centres aim to help students to improve their writing by themselves through tutorial interactions instead of fixing their papers. At the same time, tutors in writing centres are expected to address each student's needs. In fact, students come to the writing centre for many reasons and with a range of goals, some of which may conflict with the philosophy of the writing centre's practices. Although some students may visit a writing centre in order to have their drafts corrected, writing centre tutors encourage students to discover how to improve their papers by themselves. Under this unique educational philosophy, how is the tutorial session evaluated by tutors and tutees respectively? What can be expected from writing tutorials at writing centres?

The present study is part of the author's PhD research (Nakatake, 2017) investigating the effects of writing centre tutorials on student revisions in an English as a foreign language (EFL) writing centre in Japan. This particular study focuses on tutors' and students' perceptions of tutorial success and investigates the factors that can contribute to tutors' and tutees' perceptions of tutorial success.

## **2. Literature Review**

Generally, the tutor training literature indicates that ideal tutorial sessions consist of student talking rather than tutor talking (e.g., Gillespie & Lerner, 2008; Weigle & Nelson, 2004), a focus on content and organization rather than grammar (e.g., Cogie, Kim & Sharon, 1999; Gillespie & Lerner, 2008; Harris & Silva, 1993), the negotiation of meaning in the text (Weigle & Nelson, 2004), and tutor questions to help students find their own answers to problems in their texts (Weigle & Nelson, 2004). But, what is the reality? What do tutors and tutees, the primary actors in the tutorial session, perceive a successful tutorial to be like?

In the U.S., where writing centre research has been actively conducted, some researchers have investigated tutors' and tutees' perceptions of writing centre tutorials in terms of the success of tutorials. Henning (2001) argues that the following three characteristics of tutorials can contribute to success: 1) "how well the writer and tutor negotiate an agenda" (p.4); 2) "how well the tutor helps the writer gain an understanding of some aspect of writing and helps the writer apply that knowledge" (p.6); and 3) "how well the writer and tutor establish rapport" (p.9). Building on this, Weigle and Nelson (2004) conducted a case study of six tutoring sessions with three tutors and three ESL tutees (two sessions for each pair) and identified the factors perceived as successful for both tutors and tutees. They reported that the definition of successful tutorials varied depending on tutors. In their study, tutorial success for tutors was defined in terms of their perceived "capabilities as a tutor" including whether he or she was able to answer his or her tutee's questions or whether he or she communicated successfully, "the tutee's ability to become an independent writer and self-editor", "the ability to implement a plan for the session successfully", and "the tutee's increased confidence in writing" (p.221). In contrast, it was revealed that the tutees defined success in tutoring in terms of whether they had achieved their writing goals.

In contrast to the situation in the U.S., Japanese EFL writing centres have a relatively short history and there have only been a few empirical studies which investigated tutors' and tutees' perceptions of writing centre tutorials. For instance, Hays (2010) conducted a questionnaire and interview with student users regarding writing centre tutorial and tutors and reported that many students evaluated their tutorial session as very helpful. In addition, tutees were satisfied with the friendly attitude of their peer tutors and reacted very positively to peer tutors instead of teachers. In another study, Narita et al. (2012) reported undergraduate tutors' and students' perceptions of tutorial sessions and their tutoring experiences. Comments from both tutors and tutees were positive and also revealed positive learning experiences for both the tutor and the tutee.

Although the previous studies have reported tutors' and students' positive reactions to writing centre tutorials or tutoring experiences in Japanese EFL writing centres, the factors that influence the tutorial success, perceived by both tutors and tutees, still remains unexplored. Therefore, the present study aims to examine which factors can influence tutors' and tutees' perceived tutorial success in a Japanese EFL writing centre. Although numerous empirical studies on ESL writing centre have been conducted in the U.S., not all aspects of U.S. writing centres or the knowledge gained from U.S. writing centre studies can be applied to effective tutoring practice in Japan, where English is a foreign language. Writing centres in Japanese universities are different from U.S. writing centres in the populations of tutors and the language of tutorials. Tutors in U.S. writing centres are peer tutors, who are undergraduate or graduate students and in most cases, they are L1 English speakers. U.S. writing centres offer tutorial sessions in English for students' L1 English or ESL writing. In Japan, on the other hand, the major body of tutors are graduate students who are either L1 speakers of Japanese or fluent in Japanese with a

high English proficiency and the rest are L1 English speaking teachers at the university. Regarding the language of tutoring, there are tutoring English writing conducted in English, tutoring English writing conducted in Japanese. What matters is that most of the writing centres in Japan offer tutorial sessions in English or Japanese for EFL writing within an institution where the primary language of communication is Japanese. The linguistic, cultural, and educational context surrounding Japanese writing centres is different from the U.S. cases. Needless to say, the linguistic, cultural, and educational background of tutors and tutees in Japanese writing centres is also significantly different from U.S. writing centres. Thus, empirical writing centre studies need to be conducted in Japanese writing centres in order to offer suggestions for effective tutoring practice specific to the Japanese EFL context. The findings of the present study are expected to be valuable in that they provide new insights into a successful tutoring approach with L2 writers.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants

The setting for this study was a writing centre at a large-scale national university. Participants comprised six tutoring pairs. The tutors were graduate students from various departments; they were either L1 speakers of Japanese or fluent in Japanese with a high English proficiency. Tutees were first year science students in a mandatory scientific English writing program; they were all Japanese, who speak Japanese as their L1. In that course, the students were required to write an experimental scientific paper which uses the IMRaD (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion) structure in English based on their own experiment. In this study, each student participant visited the writing centre according to his or her own initiative.

Information regarding the tutorial sessions is provided in Table 1. The six sessions were coded as A-F. In Tutorial E and F, the student was the same. All sessions were conducted in Japanese, the tutees' L1.

Table 1  
*Tutorial Session Information*

Tutorial	Total time (min)	Tutor (gender)	Tutor area of expertise	Student (gender)	Student's paper content area	First-time or repeat visit?	Deadline of paper submission
A	36	T1 (F)	History	S1 (M)	Physics	First-time	14 days later
B	19	T2 (F)	Literature	S2 (F)	Physics	Repeat	1 day later
C	48	T3 (F)	International Studies	S3 (M)	Geological Science	First-time	1 day later
D	58	T4 (F)	Applied Linguistics	S4 (M)	Experimental Psychology	Repeat	1 day later
E	36	T5 (M)	Linguistics	S5 (M)	Experimental Psychology	First-time	48 days later
F	45	T6 (F)	English Education	S5 (M)	Experimental Psychology	Repeat	7 days later

*Note:* F in parentheses shows female and M shows male, respectively.

### 3.2 Procedure

With the students' and tutors' consent, after their tutorials, both the students and tutors were asked to answer Thompson's (2010) questionnaire consisting of eight questions regarding the writing centre tutorial they engaged in (see Appendix A for tutors and Appendix B for tutees). Thompson's (2010) questionnaire was originally developed to grasp the students' and tutors' attitude towards writing centre tutorials. Answers were given on a five-scale points<sup>2</sup>. In the present study, the five-point Likert scale questionnaire was not used for statistical processing purpose but for a basis for the following semi-structured interviews. Questionnaire items for tutors and tutees were basically parallel to each other. The eight questionnaire items for tutors and tutees are as follows:

#### Questionnaires for tutors

- Q1. Who talked the most during the conference?
- Q2. Did you believe that you sufficiently addressed the student's questions?
- Q3. What did you believe the student's comfort level to be?
- Q4. How directive do you think your comments or questions were?
- Q5. How much positive feedback do you think you gave?
- Q6. What did you perceive your role to be in the conference?
- Q7. How successful do you think the session was?
- Q8. To what extent do you think that this conference will influence the student in revising his or her writing?

#### Questionnaires for tutees

- Q1. Who talked the most during the conference?
- Q2. How did you view the tutor?
- Q3. Did the tutor sufficiently answer your questions?
- Q4. How comfortable were you in the conference?
- Q5. What was the tutor's level of expertise?
- Q6. Did the tutor give you encouragement or point to the good parts of your draft?
- Q7. How successful was the conference?
- Q8. To what extent did you incorporate the results of this conference in your writing?

After completing the questionnaire, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the tutors and students in Japanese for an average length of 60 minutes to determine why they chose the answer in each question. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In order to clarify tutors' and students' perceptions of tutorial success, this paper focuses on the findings from the interview with tutors and tutees based on the results of Question 7 (How successful do you think the session was? / How successful was the conference?) of Thompson's (2010) questionnaire. Time spent

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<sup>2</sup> In Thompson's (2010) questionnaire, answers are given on a six-point Likert scale.

interviewing regarding Questions 7 was five to ten minutes. In this study, all the tutors' and tutees' comments from the interviews were coded, sorted out, and converged into several concepts. Related concepts were categorized into bigger groups. In this process, the factors that can contribute to tutors' and tutees' perceptions of tutorial success were extracted.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the results of Question 7 in each tutorial session. In the present study, all tutors and students felt their sessions were highly successful, with the mode rating being 4. Regarding the students' responses to Question 7, there was some minimal variation in Tutorial D, E, and F, with rating ranging from 3 to 5. There was also little difference in the evaluation of their tutorials between tutors and tutees.

Table 2  
Questionnaire Results

Q7	Tutorial A	Tutorial B	Tutorial C	Tutorial D	Tutorial E	Tutorial F
Tutor	4	4	4	4	5	4
Tutee	4	4	4	3	4	5

Note: 1: 5-point Likert scales. 1: Not successful<-->5: Very successful

##### 4.1 Successful Tutorial for Tutors

The interview data with six tutors revealed mainly two emergent factors. One factor that influenced the perceived tutorial success by tutors is their contribution as a tutor. Most of the tutors (four out of six) in the present study refer to this factor when commenting on the success of the tutorials, as represented by the following comments.

- “I was able to make useful suggestions and the student seemed to be satisfied with them.” (T1 in Tutorial A who marked 4, T3 in Tutorial C who marked 4)
- “I judged this session as highly successful because I could point out all parts to be improved in the text and help the student solve the problems in the text by himself.” (T5 in Tutorial E who marked 5)
- “I was not be able to check the entire paper due to lack of time.” (T2 in Tutorial B who marked 4)

As the above comments suggest, whether tutors can sufficiently check their students' papers and point out the problems in their texts within a given time and give useful and appropriate advice to solve the problems can be a crucial aspect influencing the success of the tutorials. T4 evaluated her session as highly successful, but she marked 4, not 5. When she was asked why she did not mark 5, she replied, “I marked 4 instead of 5 because I was afraid I could not solve all the problems the student had and also could not provide satisfactory feedback on the parts the student had really wanted to discuss in the session.” T4's comment suggests that the contribution as a tutor, regarded as students' satisfaction

with the session or tutor feedback given in the session, can influence perceived tutorial success.

Another factor that contributed to tutors' perception of tutorial success was the student's development as a writer. T4 in Tutorial D, who marked 4, explained that the improvement in the quality of students' writing after the session can contribute to the success of the tutorials. Moreover, she stated that whether the tutorial session has a long-term effect on students' writing might be related to the success of the tutorials, even though the student would not notice the effects or the tutors could not check it. According to her, the session will finally be judged as successful when what the student has learned in the session is believed to be helpful in writing scientific paper in the future. In addition, T2 in Tutorial B, who marked 4, stated, "I think helping the student to discover how to improve the text by him or herself results in a successful tutorial." T5 in Tutorial E, who marked 5, mentioned, "I judged the session as highly successful because the student understood why he had to revise the parts I pointed out". He also expected that the student would be able to autonomously revise his text in the future based on what has been discussed in this session. Likewise, T2 in Tutorial B explained that leading the student to discover how to improve the text and revise the text autonomously results in session success. She also mentioned that in unsuccessful tutorial sessions, the student turns a deaf ear to his or her tutor's advice and refuses to discuss how to improve the text. In summary, the student's perceived development as a writer includes not merely the improvement of the quality of students' writing after the session but also their increased awareness of effective writing through the session.

#### **4.2 Successful Tutorial for Tutees**

As presented in Table 2, many students evaluated their tutorial session as highly successful. However, through the interviews with the students, it was found that the perception of tutorial success varies among students. Based on the analysis of student comments, three main factors seem to have contributed to the success of tutorial session: satisfaction with the session, satisfaction with the revised paper, and students' writing development.

For S1 in Tutorial A, S2 in Tutorial B, and S4 in Tutorial D, tutorial success was associated with satisfaction with their session. For this question, S1 and S2 marked 4, and S4 marked 3. All of the three mentioned that they had not marked 5 because their tutors had not checked all parts of their text because of a lack of time. S1 in Tutorial A stated, "The tutor did not check all parts of my text due to lack of time, though I acquired the knowledge and information I needed." S4 in Tutorial D commented, "The session time was not enough. I wanted the tutor to check the whole paper." S2, who has visited the writing centre three times, stated, "The tutor made very useful suggestions based on fully understanding the content of my paper." In addition, S2 expressed her perceived success of the tutorial session by comparing it to other sessions she had before: "In the first tutorial session, my tutor just understood the content of my experiment by asking me many

questions. In the second session, she gave me feedback on my paper. In the third session, she gave me feedback on the paper I had revised based on the feedback I received in the previous session, which gave me the greatest satisfaction.” For S2, how much appropriate feedback the tutor gives after fully understanding the content of her paper seems to be another important factor to determine tutorial success. To conclude, whether the tutor fairly and extensively checked the student’s paper and the extent to which the tutor provided appropriate and constructive feedback appears to be a strong influence on satisfaction.

For S2 in Tutorial B, S3 in Tutorial C, and S5 in Tutorial F, tutorial success seemed to be measured in terms of satisfaction with revisions after the session. S5 in Tutorial F stated, “I marked 5 for this question because I could submit the satisfactory revised paper based on all tutor feedback given in the session.” S3 in Tutorial C who marked 4 made interesting remarks regarding this point. In the interview, S3 said, “although I am satisfied with this tutorial session, I felt that if I had visited the writing centre before, I could have received more useful feedback from the tutor in this session and the quality of my revised paper after this session might have been more improved. So, I marked 4, not 5.” S2 in Tutorial B stated, “even though the tutor gives me different advice from what I expected, if my revised paper becomes more reader-friendly, I regard the session as successful.”

S5 in Tutorial F who marked 5 refers to tutorial success slightly differently. In the interview, S5 said, “I regard this session as successful because I realized my English writing absolutely improved through the session. I gained a better understanding of academic writing and learned how to proofread by myself more effectively.” S2 in Tutorial B, who marked 4, mentioned speaking with the tutor as helping to see the paper from a different view and figure out how to make my essay more effective.” In summary, the students’ writing development is not merely about their writing skills but is also about their increased awareness of effective writing that can influence their perceptions of a successful tutorial.

### **4.3 Summary**

The results showed that tutors and tutees defined their tutorial success differently. In the present study, tutors perceived tutorial success in terms of their contribution as a tutor, their students’ satisfaction with the session, and their student’s development as a writer. On the other hand, the key factors that contributed to tutees’ perceptions of tutorial success included satisfaction with their session, satisfaction with their revised paper, and their writing development. In both the cases of tutors and tutees, perceptions of tutorial success were found to be influenced by multiple factors.

With regard to tutors’ perceptions of a successful tutorial, some findings of the present study support the results of Henning (2001) and Weigle and Nelson (2004). For example, contribution as a tutor can correspond to capabilities as a tutor found in Weigle and Nelson (2004). Students’ development as a writer are similar to “whether or not the student is able to get and apply the information he or she needs” (p.11) observed in

Henning (2001). It can be assumed that this is due to the fact that writing centre tutors basically provide students with tutorials under the shared goal of writing centres in any contexts despite the differences in the target student population and the kinds of assistance they provide. On the other hand, regarding tutees' perceptions of a successful tutorial, other new factors were observed in this study. This implies that tutees' varied perceptions of a successful tutorial can reflect the diversity of their expectations for writing centre tutorials. In addition, it was indicated that compared to tutors' perceptions, tutees' perceptions of tutorial success may be more varied according to the context of writing centre tutorials. The contextual factors that can influence the variation of tutees' perceptions of tutorial success is another issue to be discussed in future research.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated what factors can influence tutors' and tutees' perceived tutorial success. The comments from both tutors and tutees are valuable resources for the improved practice of writing centre tutorials. Interestingly, the characteristics of good tutoring sessions mentioned earlier were not referred to by either the tutor or the student when commenting on the perceived successful tutorial. There seems to be a gap between the ideal session cited in a textbook and the perceived successful session. For effective tutoring, therefore, tutors should be trained to understand what makes a tutorial session successful without relying solely on a textbook. The present findings will help make such training possible.

Although tutors and tutees have their own perceptions of tutorial success, some aspects of their perceived successful tutorial overlap and correspond. Based on the findings, this study suggests some clues to conducting successful tutorials from the perspective of both tutors and tutees. One key point in creating a successful tutorial is how sufficiently the tutor addresses the student's needs in a session. In order to achieve this, the following three skills are required. The first point is the tutor's diagnostic ability. Tutors are required to diagnose almost instantly what kind of help the student needs and prioritize tasks accordingly during a session. The second point is agenda setting. The tutor and student each bring a goal to the session and they must try to share these goals with each other. Therefore, tutors are required to negotiate with their students on a mutually agreeable goal. The agenda setting during the first five or ten minutes of a session is thus perhaps one of the most crucial phases of writing centre tutorials. The last point is familiarizing students with the goal of writing centres to help students become better writers. As mentioned earlier, some students are likely to expect writing centres to proofread their papers. Disseminating accurate information about the support service of writing centres can contribute to avoiding or minimizing such students' frustration about their tutorial sessions.

Another key point in the success of a tutorial session is how the tutor raises the student's awareness of effective writing and helps the student discover how to improve

the text by him or herself. Because the session length is limited, it is impossible for tutors to point out all the problematic points in the student's text. However, if the tutor successfully helps the student learn the skills needed to improve not just this paper but subsequent papers, even though tutor feedback cannot be offered on all problematic points in the student drafts, the student can apply what they learned through the session to their overall performance and future revisions.

The present study discussed the perceived tutorial success based only on the results of Question 7 of Thompson's (2010) questionnaires. Future research will be required to further discuss the tutorial success relating to the results of Thompson's (2010) questionnaire for the other items. Further research should also investigate what interactional features appear in conversation in the perceived successful tutorial and which of these interactional features tutors and tutees refer to when commenting on the success of the tutorials.

Furthermore, assessment of success should be another key issue for future research. The present study is a small case study in a specific writing centre setting, and has limitations in respect of size and representation. Each writing centre in Japan has their own roles and are organized to fit the needs of the universities and students. Therefore, there may be a variety of definitions of success in writing centre tutoring. More empirical studies are needed to establish systematic writing centre assessment. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study are expected to provide valuable insights for the development of assessment of writing centre tutorial success, as well as for development of more effective writing centre tutoring practice in Japan.

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