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Jo Mackiewicz and Zach Gasior

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## Abstract

Most tutors are trained in a core writing centers belief: Student writers who talk about their writing are student writers who will achieve better learning outcomes. Our comparative study—one of few in writing center research—examined the points in conferences in which student writers talked the most. We examined the very long turns (VLTs) of eight native English speaking (NES) student writers and eight non-native English speaking (NNES) student writers across 16 writing center conferences. We found that NESs contributed more VLTs than NNESs and that more NES conferences contained VLTs. We also found that stating goals for the conference occurred in half of the NES conferences, specifically, in the opening stage, while no NNES conferences had stated opening goals. In the three NNES conferences that contained VLTs, two contained a statement of a sentence-level goal, a description of potential content for the paper, and a period of time spent reading aloud from the paper. Of the VLTs preceded by questions, pumping questions (questions that prod student responses) occurred most frequently. We discuss the role that student-writer motivation and familiarity with the typical conference script played in the results and some implications of this comparative study for tutor training.

As any writing center tutor knows, a lot of the time, encouraging student writers to talk can be a challenge, particularly when student writers are non-native speakers of the language in use. As Muriel Harris (2005) pointed out in “Talk to Me: Engaging Reluctant Writers,” a given student writer may be any or all the following: forced to schedule a conference, uninterested in writing, nervous about critique, or simply a quiet person by nature, among other possibilities (pp. 24–26). Whatever the case, writing center tutors typically do their best to engage student writers in a conversation about writing, a two-way exchange that generates ideas and promotes learning. In this, tutors follow a practice that stems from what has become a core belief among those who work in writing centers: Student writers who talk about their writing are student writers who are engaged in their own learning, and student writers who are engaged in their own learning achieve better learning outcomes.

Thankfully, prior research has suggested that writing center tutors can prompt student writers’ contributions of talk during their conferences. Terese Thonus (2004), for example, pointed out that “most tutor preparation includes specific instruction on asking questions [and] prompting writer reflection” (p. 228). Other research (e.g., Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b) has suggested that asking open-ended pumping questions, for example, “What do you think might work here?” might generate the most substantial contributions from student writers. Not many studies in writing center research, however, have focused on student writers’ contributions to their conferences, much less compared contributions from native English speaking (NES) student writers and non-native English speaking (NNES) student writers. Such comparisons are useful because they reveal differences between groups and thus allow us to determine best practices. The study we present here starts to fill this gap.

First, we examined the 39 occasions in 16 writing center conferences when student writers actually *did* contribute very long turns<sup>1</sup> (VLTs) and thus held the conversational floor<sup>2</sup> for some time, as one student (S40<sup>3</sup>) did in the talk excerpted below when, in a 60-word VLT, she asked her tutor (T12) a question about software that helps organize and generate citations:

Excerpt 1

S40:           But I don’t know- [4s]  
T12:           I had [no idea.

- 1 In linguistics, generally, a turn is defined as a stretch of one speaker’s talk that holds the conversational floor until a turn exchange occurs. See the Methods section.
- 2 We define conversational floor as the right to speak. Carole Edelsky (1981) discussed two types of floors: the “one-at-a-time type of floor” and “the other, a collaborative venture” (p. 384).
- 3 S refers to student-writer; 40 indicates that this person was the 40th student writer to participate in the study. We use T for tutor.

S40: *[if people do that more so- Because that was another question I had was, um, if you knew of more up-to-date resources I could use? I have Word at my house but a lot of the college students are using other things and if you knew about it I just wanted to know too.<sup>4</sup>*

To study such VLTs, we examined the following: the frequency of the long turns (LTs) and the VLTs of eight NESs and eight NNESs, the content of the student writers' VLTs, and the talk that preceded NESs' and NNESs' VLTs. Our aim was to determine the types of content that led student writers to take up and maintain the conversational floor in a substantial turn at talk and whether various question types from tutors, such as knowledge-deficit questions (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2014), or certain tutoring strategies, such as suggesting and explaining strategies (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b), triggered the VLTs that we identified. This study, then, has implications for tutor training in that its findings suggest the types of talk that can prompt student writers' active participation—operationalized via VLTs—in their writing center conferences.

### Volubility in Writing Center Conferences

Given their institutional roles, writing center tutors tend to contribute more words to conferences than student writers do, no matter student writers' status as native or non-native speakers of the language in use. As Jo Mackiewicz (2018) wrote, "Tutors' volubility arises out of their institutional role and its concomitant responsibilities, such as providing advice; managing the interaction; encouraging student writers; and, sometimes, reading student writers' papers aloud" (p. 62). Research backs up this generalization. Studying NES tutors who worked at the same writing center but seventeen years apart, Mackiewicz (2018) found that in the year 2000, tutors contributed 74% of the total words spoken, and in 2017 they contributed 69% (p. 62; see also Pathney-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Corbett, 2011).

Studying NES tutors and NES student writers, Mackiewicz & Isabelle Thompson (2018b) found that the tutors' volubility exceeded student writers' in the teaching stage of the conference, typically by far the longest stage of a conference and the stage in which "the main pedagogical work of the conference takes place" over a span of different topic episodes, segments of talk devoted to a single topic (p. 71).<sup>5</sup> In the teaching stage of the 10 conferences that Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018b) studied, tutors were more valuable than the student writers, "a result in keeping with [the] ... need to work toward

4 We use italics to denote VLTs. See Appendix for transcription conventions.

5 See Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018b) for a more detailed description of conference stages.

accomplishing the agenda set in the opening within the time limit of about 30 minutes” (p. 71). In the teaching stage, tutors contributed about 70% of the total talk (p. 71). The frequency of contributions was similar in the closing stage (Thonus, 2016; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b). In contrast, in the opening stage, the stage in which “tutors and student writers got acquainted and set a conference agenda” (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b, p. 69), tutors contributed just 43% of the talk (p. 70). The findings of all these studies together suggest that in general, tutors are far more voluble than student writers but also that student writers are likely to be more valuable when the task at hand is setting the conference agenda as opposed to carrying it out.

In addition, research has suggested that tutor volubility is likely to increase when NES tutors work with NNES student writers. Thonus (1999), for example, found that the ratio of (presumably NES) tutors’ words to NNES student writers’ words was 1.9:1; that is, the tutors’ talk was nearly double that of the NNES student writers’ talk. But the ratio between the tutors’ talk and NES student writers’ talk was 1.3:1. In a later study that similarly analyzed volubility in talk between tutors and student writers, Thonus (2002) found that tutors who worked with NNESs were “considerably more valuable” than tutors who worked with NESs (p. 121). While student writers’ active participation in their conferences and, thus, their learning requires more than volubility, conferences in which student writers’ contributions often extend beyond one-word responses into substantial contributions are more likely to be ones in which student writers have actively participated. And so far, research has shown that when NES tutors conference with NNESs, they are less likely to generate the student-writer volubility that would engender active participation.

### Active Participation in Writing Center Conferences

The idea that students achieve better learning outcomes when they actively engage in their learning by analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information is not new (see, for example, Prince, 2004; Freeman, Eddy, McDonough, Smith, Okoroafor, Jordt, & Wenderoth, 2014). Nancy Lawson Remler (2002), for instance, claimed that active learning helps students comprehend concepts and solve problems (see also McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith, 1986). The benefits of active participation were clear in Jessica Williams’s (2004) study of second language writers’ revisions. Studying five NNES writers working with four NES tutors, Williams found that no revision occurred in the five conferences when students were “not actively involved” but instead contributed “minimally to the exchange” (p. 189). She concluded that student writers’ active participation is essential to successful revision.

Williams’s (2004) work built on that of Lynn M. Goldstein & Susan M. Conrad (1990), who studied three students in an advanced composition class.

The students met with their teacher in 20-minute conferences and received written feedback on their draft papers. Like Williams did, Goldstein & Conrad found that their student writer participants differed greatly in the amount of interactional work (for example, topic raising, clarifying meaning, questioning) they did during the conferences. In the three conferences they analyzed, they found that student writers who negotiated revisions produced more successful revisions (p. 452). Further, they found that “when the students did not negotiate (i.e., when the teacher made revision suggestions and the student backchanneled<sup>6</sup>), the subsequent revisions were often either unsuccessful or not attempted at all” (p. 454). In short, the findings of these primarily qualitative studies suggest that students’ active participation in pedagogical interactions, including pedagogical interactions about writing, facilitates their learning.

Writing center research has investigated the kinds of teacher and tutor talk, including questions (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2014; Limberg, Modey, & Dyer, 2016), and tutoring strategies (Thonus, 1999; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b) that can help prompt students’ active participation in pedagogical interactions. In her study of student writer turns at talk of over 100 words,<sup>7</sup> Mackiewicz (2018) found that these substantial turns at talk were triggered by several question types from tutors. Of the 16 turns over 100 words that eight student writers produced, three were preceded by pumping questions, questions that “prod students to think and then help them to push their thinking further” (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b, p. 7). Pumping questions range in the extent to which they limit a response. That is, they can be quite open-ended, as in “What do you think about your conclusion?” or quite close-ended, as in the yes-no question, “Do you think that your conclusion repeats too much of your introduction?” Pumping questions, particularly open-ended pumping questions, can push students to form answers for themselves (Chi, Bassok, Lewis, Reimann, & Glaser, 1989; Chi, De Leeuw, Chiu, & Lavancher, 1994; Chi, 1996; Rosé, Bhembe, Siler, Srivastava, & VanLehn, 2003; Smith & Higgins, 2006) and thus actively engage in their own learning.

In her study, Mackiewicz (2018) also found that two of the 100-or-greater-word turns were preceded by conversation-control questions, questions that steer the flow of the conversation, such as “Do you have any more questions?” (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2014, p. 43). One of the 100-or-greater-word turns was preceded by a knowledge-deficit question, a question that aims “to gain

6 A backchannel is a response, such as “mmhm” or “uhuh,” that signals the listener is paying attention, may overlap the conversational-floor holder’s talk, and does not claim the conversational floor.

7 Mackiewicz (2018) used the term “VLT” for turns over 100 words; in the present study, we have used a different benchmark for what constitutes a VLT. Thus, in referring to Mackiewicz’s (2018) study, we use the phrase “100-word turn” rather than the abbreviation “VLT.”

information or request clarification about a topic,” (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2014, p. 42), for example, “So he’s, like, just straddling the line the whole time?” Finally, one 100-or-greater-word turn was preceded by a forced-choice question, a question that presents two or more options, thus providing and limiting responses, such as “Was she your grandmother’s sister or your grandfather’s sister?” These findings suggested that with questions of various types, tutors can elicit substantial turns-at-talk from student writers. However, Mackiewicz also found that six of the 16 turns (38%) that exceeded 100 words were preceded by no tutor question at all. Mackiewicz wrote,

The other six ... arose from student writers’ own initiative—their willingness to take control over the progression of the conference to get their needs met. The student writers who contributed these ... seemed highly motivated to use the [writing center’s] help to its fullest extent and to get their questions answered. (p. 168)

Given the importance of active participation for student learning and engagement, in this study, we dove deeper into analysis of student writers’ substantial contributions of talk during their conferences. Our goals were to determine (1) the frequency of student writers’ VLTs; (2) the content types within student writers’ VLTs; and (3) the ways in which questions and tutoring strategies triggered student writers’ VLTs and, concomitantly, their active participation in their conferences.

## Methods

### Data Set and Participants

We analyzed NESs’ and NNESSs’ turns, using transcripts from a set of 16 writing center conferences as our data. We selected these 16 conferences from a larger data set of 44 tutor-student writer conferences<sup>8</sup> so that the current data set would include as many unique tutors as possible: eight. Also, we wanted to include 16 unique student writers, eight NESs and eight NNESSs, from the original data set. Our goal, then, was to create as large a sample as possible.

In addition to the 16 conferences, we relied upon post-conference interviews with the tutors and student writers to supplement our analysis. The interviews with tutors and student writers occurred within a few days of the participants’ conferences. Interviews with student writers began with a set of common questions to generate participants’ responses. For example, student writers were asked to consider their experiences in their conferences:

- What are your expectations for a writing center conference?

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8 Data collection and analysis were approved by the IRB of Iowa State University, where the researchers are affiliated. In addition, they were approved by the IRB of the University of Wisconsin-Superior (UWS), where data collection occurred..

- How did the consultant give you options for improving your writing?
- How did the consultant encourage you to continue to work on your writing to improve it?<sup>9</sup>

Interviews diverged from these questions as participants' individual experiences came to the fore. For example, interviews probed NNES student writers' experiences with writing in their native languages and in English, asking questions such as the following: "How has the writing you've done here at the University of Wisconsin-Superior (UWS) differed from the writing you did in school back home?" and "What's the hardest thing about writing for your classes here at UWS?" Interviews with tutors asked them to consider their approach to conferences, such as, "How did you give the client options for improving their writing?" and "How did you encourage the client to continue to work on their writing to improve it?"

The eight tutors were all NESs; six were from the United States, one was from Canada, and one was from Ghana. They ranged in age from 19 to 24, averaging 21.5. They had worked in the writing center for one to two academic years, and they all had received at least four weeks of on-the-job training that involved observing, cotutoring, and solo tutoring. They had also completed three one-hour sessions of ESL training, which involved familiarizing them with the international student population at UWS, treatable and untreatable errors in ESL writing, and responding as a reader. The student writers ranged in age from 18 to 51, averaging 23.2. Two (both NESs) had never been to the writing center before. Seven of the NES student writers were from the United States, and one was from the Philippines. The NNES student writers were from Japan, Nepal, South Korea, and Italy. Because the sample size is so small, race and gender are not included here.

### **Determining the Frequency of Student Writers' Very Long Turns**

We defined a turn as an utterance that held the conversational floor until a turn exchange occurred. This idea of taking and maintaining the conversational floor is important because it helps explain the very nature of human conversation: In a cooperative conversation, one person has the conversational floor at a time, and speakers exchange the conversational floor (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 293). Any stretch of talk during which one person held the conversational floor constituted one turn in our study. We used changes in speakers to determine turn lengths.

However, when discussing student writers' one-word utterances, we use the term "turn" somewhat loosely; some of the short utterances that student

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix B in Mackiewicz (2018) for a full list of interview questions for student writers.



writers contributed to their conferences did constitute a turn in the linguistic sense of the term, but others did not. In the linguistic sense of the term, a turn holds the conversational floor (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 292). Following this definition, S47's talk in Excerpt 2 exemplifies one-word turns that hold the conversational floor. With one-word responses, S47 answered T14's knowledge-deficit question ("Was this capitalized in the book?") and agreed with T14's assessment ("Weird"):

Excerpt 2

- T14: Um, and then I- So this "Everyone has to find out find that one out for themselves." I don't know. Was this capitalized in the book?
- S47: **Yeah.**
- T14: What? [[laughs] Really?
- S47: [Yeah. It was. I double- I triple checked it.
- T14: Weird.
- S47: **Yeah.**
- T14: Weird.

Excerpt 2 exemplifies how, even with the shortest of turns, student writers responded to tutors' questions and demonstrated that they understood tutors' advice and evaluations.

However, some student writers' utterances, particularly one-word utterances, were backchannels, utterances that signal the speaker of the one-word utterance is following along with what the other person is saying. In a sense, then, they do not take the conversational floor. Nonetheless, we counted such occurrences as turns because with these utterances, student writers showed their engagement in the conversation and, thus, signaled their active participation. In addition, including all student writers' one-word utterances in our word counts allowed us to account for student writers' total volubility.

We wanted to account for student writers' one-word turns in our calculation of the average length of student writers' turns and, concomitantly, our benchmark for a LT and a VLT. In all but one of the 16 conferences (a NES conference), the mode length—the most common length—of a single student-writer turn was one word. More specifically, in NESs' talk, the percentage of one-word turns ranged from 12 to 39% of student writers' total turns per conference, averaging 27%. In NNESs' talk, the percentage of one-word turns ranged from 17 to 52%, averaging 35% of their total turns. With one-word turns included, NESs' turn length ranged from 1 to 138 words, averaging 9.40 words. NNES turn length ranged from 1 to 97 words, averaging 6.15 words. However, because both groups used so many one-word turns, the average turn length for both groups skewed low. Thus, to better determine the NESs' and NNESs' average turn length and substantially decrease the possibility of including

potential backchannels, we calculated student writers' average turn length based on turns of two or more words. Through this calculation, we found that NESs' average turn length was 12.33 words and NNESSs' average turn length was 8.98 words.

We used these average turn lengths to determine our thresholds for what would constitute an LT and a VLT. We used the average of NESs' and NNESSs' average turn lengths, 10.65, to calculate LT and VLT. We decided that double the 10.65 average turn length, 21 words, would constitute an LT. S43's turn below is a 27-word example:

Excerpt 3

S43: Blog post, yeah. And she wants us to write the comment traits like we what we commented. What others commented on. Blog posts. Like a short summary.

We then used our operationalization of an LT to determine the number of words that would constitute a VLT. As noted previously, Mackiewicz (2018) used a 100-word benchmark to discuss student writers' VLTs. Rather than use this arbitrary number, we determined that double the LT length, 42 words, would constitute a VLT in this study. S35's turn is 46-word example:

Excerpt 4

S35: *Yeah. Like, he doesn't even reference his question in the entire article. If you wouldn't have read the subtext, like, the subtitle, you wouldn't have known there was an argument here. You would've just thought it was, like, to give you random facts about the college.*

From there, we counted the number of student writers' LTs and VLTs, which we report in the results section.

### **Analyzing Content Types Within Student Writers' Very Long Turns**

We then moved to qualitative analysis of our data, analyzing NESs' and NNESSs' combined 39 VLTs for their content types, modifying the scheme Mackiewicz (2018) developed to categorize the content of student writers' 100-word turns. Table 1 includes the nine content types found in student writers' 100-word utterances that Mackiewicz identified, as well as two other content types that we added based on our analysis.

**Table 1***Codes and Descriptions of VLT Content Types*

Content type code	Content type description
1	Background information on the writing task
2	Background on writing process of and concerns about developing the paper
3	Statement of goals for the conference (based on the task and the status of the paper)
4	Statement of a sentence-level goal
5	Explanation of subject matter (e.g., a theory, a historical event, a software program) relevant to the paper
6	Description of the current state of the paper
7	Clarification of intentions behind existing words, sentences, and paragraphs
8	Description of potential content for the paper, including contribution of spoken written-language, or SWL (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018a)
9	Question to tutor
10	Reading from the paper
11	Statement of postconference actions

We used the scheme in Table 1 to code the content of NESS' and NNESS' 39 VLTs. We found that some turns contained two or even three types of content, as Mackiewicz (2018) found as well (p. 161). We independently coded 50 excerpts from student writers' LTs to test the reliability of the coding scheme. We achieved a Cohen's kappa statistic of 0.794, which is considered a moderate to strong level of agreement (McHugh, 2012, p. 279) or a good level of agreement (Altman, 1991, p. 404).

### **Analyzing Tutors' Utterances Preceding Student Writers' Very Long Turns**

In the third and last component of our study, we analyzed questions and tutoring strategies that preceded student writers' VLTs to determine the triggers of NESS' and NNESS' most-substantial contributions to their conferences. To determine question types, like Mackiewicz (2018), we used a modified version of Thompson & Mackiewicz's (2014) delineation of question types. We discussed some of these question types earlier; nevertheless, a summary of the scheme that we used to classify triggers for student writers' VLTs appears in

Table 2. In our frequency counts, we included pumping questions as questions as opposed to tutoring strategies.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 2**

*Question Types, Based on Thompson & Mackiewicz's (2014) Scheme*

Question type	Description
Pumping <sup>a</sup>	Questions pushing student writers forward in their thinking, including in their brainstorming and revising. Example: "What is the sentence saying or, like, what is its intent?"
Knowledge deficit	Questions obtaining information that they genuinely do not know. These questions aim to gain information or request clarification about a topic. Example: "Who's kind of his target audience, do you think?"
Conversation control	Questions relating to the flow of the dialogue and to the participants' attention. Example: "Do you have any more questions?"
Social coordination	Questions relating to the actions of the student writer and the tutor during the conference. Example: "Would you read this sentence aloud?"
Common ground	Questions ascertaining what the student writer needs, wants, and knows (for example, about the writing assignment). Example: "Do you understand?"
Forced choice	Questions limiting response by presenting two or more options. Example: "Now, 'The boys tell their friends' or 'the boys tells their friends'?" (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b, p. 120)

<sup>a</sup>Thompson & Mackiewicz (2014) included pumping questions in their broad category of "leading and scaffolding" questions, categorizing them with forced-choice questions and questions for which tutors seemed to have an answer in mind already. In other work on tutoring strategies, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2013) included questions that seemed intended to lead student writers to a particular response as pumping questions. They categorized forced-choice questions separately (but found them rarely).

We also analyzed the tutoring strategies that preceded student writers' VLTs. As Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018b) discussed, tutoring strategies fall into three main categories: instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding. Instruction, they wrote, "refers to the directive aspects of teaching and tutoring—supplying solutions or options, rather than supporting or

<sup>10</sup> Pumping questions are a question type, but they also constitute a tutoring strategy, more specifically, a cognitive scaffolding strategy.

making room for student writers to generate solutions themselves” (p. 6). Cognitive scaffolding strategies, they explained,

require students, as polite conversationalists, to engage in dialogue of some sort with tutors. In an ideal writing center conference, the dialogue of cognitive scaffolding allows the tutor to assess the student writer’s level of understanding and then adapt his or her next moves according to what the student writer already knows. (pp. 6–7)

These strategies push students forward in their thinking. Finally, motivational scaffolding strategies “provide encouragement through praise, assurances of caring, and statements reinforcing student writers’ ownership of their writing. They assist tutors in building rapport, solidarity, and trust during conferences, helping to construct a safe space that encourages student writers’ active participation” (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b, p. 7).

## Results and Discussion

### Frequency of LTs and VLTs

Of NESs’ 1,166 turns (including one-word turns), 120 were LTs, and 31 were VLTs. Of NNESs’ 1,078 turns (again, including one-word turns), 53 were LTs and only eight were VLTs. In two of the eight (25%) NES conferences, there were no VLTs. In five of the eight (63%) NNES conferences, there were no VLTs. Nearly all NES and NNES conferences contained at least one LT, but one NNES conference contained no LTs at all.<sup>11</sup> Table 3 shows the frequency of LTs and VLTs in NESs’ and NNESs’ talk.

**Table 3**

*Frequencies of NES and NNES Student Writers’ LTs and VLTs*

Turn type	Frequency	
	NES	NNES
LTs	120	53
VLTs	31	8

Because individual NESs and NNESs contributed different numbers of turns in their conferences, we calculated the percentage of turns in each confer-

<sup>11</sup> T17-S68 contained no LTs at all. In this conference, T17 and S68 read through S68’s paper line-by-line together. Along the way, T17 suggested changes. S68 asked short questions about spoken-written language (SWL) that T17 had provided (e.g., “‘Ten.’ Is that right?”), produced SWL herself (e.g., “Is an accessory tool?”), and responded to T17’s suggestions with one-word responses, such as “ok.” In other words, S68 seemed to participate quite actively. Her turns, however, were short.

ence that were LTs and VLTs. Then, we used those percentages to calculate for NESs and for NNESSs an average percentage of turns that were LTs and VLTs. Table 4 shows these percentages.

**Table 4**

*Percentage of NES and NNES Turns That Were LTs and VLTs*

Turn type	% of turns	
	NES	NNES
LTs	10.5	4.6
VLTs	2.6	0.5

NESs' talk contained a higher percentage of LTs than NNESSs' talk did: 11% versus 5%. In addition, NESs' talk contained a higher percentage of VLTs than did NNESSs' talk: 2.6% versus 0.5%. These results indicate that few of NESs' turns and even fewer of NNESSs' turns reached 21 words, our threshold for LTs, let alone 42 words, our threshold for VLTs. In other words, both NESs and NNESSs rarely contributed substantial turns at talk, even though they interacted with trained and experienced writing center tutors.

Of NESs' 31 VLTs, 12 (39%) occurred in a single conference: T15-S50. One potential factor in S50's active participation as gauged through her frequent VLTs was the frequency with which she visited the writing center. The other NESs had visited the writing center before, and most of them had visited several times. But not only had S50 visited the writing center 10 to 15 times before, she estimated that she had worked with T15 around 10 times before. In other words, S50 was quite comfortable working with T15. In addition, in her post-conference interview (and in her conference with T15), S50 made clear that she was highly internally motivated to succeed in her writing:

S50: I have to use it [writing] for all of my classes, especially if I am going to be going into social work and teaching and just being with people it also helps with what I do everyday for interviews. Like right now this is helping. It helps with speech writing. It helps with communication skills and also helps in terms of getting a job to be professional. And also having evidence. Being able to collect evidence to support what you claim. Also having the critical thinking skills and being analytical about writing I think helps in terms of collaborative writing it helps everyone.

S50 continued with the idea of writing's contribution to professionalism, saying,

## Submission to Writing Center Journal

S50: Well, I feel like it is essential to have good writing habits throughout high school, college and your full career because it does matter. It is important to not only to the people and the boss you work with, but it is also important for whoever you would be working with like your clients because they look up to you.

These two factors likely played a role in S50's VLT production and her active participation.

Another 10 (32.2%) of NESS' VLTs occurred in the T16-S56 conference. S56 had never been to the writing center before, and he was unfamiliar with the typical conference script in which the tutor asks the student writer something like "What do you want to work on today?" (see Mackiewicz, 2018, pp. 156–159). His lack of awareness that T16, given his institutional role, would carry the conversational load likely played a role in S56's noteworthy active participation.

In addition, like S50, S56 seemed highly motivated. He had come to the writing center to get help with a paper that he wanted to include as part of a scholarship application. In a post-conference interview, he said,

S56: Yeah, this was a paper I had written a year ago already now. So I was revisiting again almost. Also, I had thought, ok, this was good and I'd submit it for a class, and it got a pretty good grade. But now it was like, a step up, I want this to be good for like a scholarship. I want this to look sharp.

Later in the conference, he noted that the writing center help had been worthwhile and that he would like to return for help on an upcoming paper for a business class:

S56: I'm probably going to be coming back pretty soon. . . . So I was thinking, "Wow, I want to make sure I go through the research but then also to be able to have the help." I hadn't really taken advantage of coming here really last year at all.

Indeed, in her post-conference interview, T16 commented on S56's positive attitude:

T16: He was really excited about getting the scholarship possibly and I think that was just part of his personality too, that energy and the positivity-

As we discuss student writers' VLTs in what follows, we refer to these and other contextual characteristics that might have played a role in generating S50's and S56's VLTs.

We found a similar imbalance in the distribution of VLTs among the NNESS' conferences. Of the eight VLTs in NNESS' talk, five (62.5%) occurred

in just one conference: T15-S52. Just three of eight NNES conferences contained VLTs at all. Interestingly, unlike most of the NNEs (S51, S58, S61, S65, and S75), S52 had only visited the writing center once before, as opposed to many times. Familiarity with the writing center, then, was not as strong for her as it was for other NNES student writers who contributed fewer (if any) VLTs.

A post-conference interview revealed some characteristics of S52 that might have led to her contribution of VLTs. S52 had used English in most of her classes in her native country, Nepal:

S52: Now, since English is not our main language, of course there's a huge difference because- What do I say? The focus I won't say because everything back in my country is taught in English. So ever since we were kids, English was the main focus for all the students.... We had to do everything in English since I went to an English medium school. So I won't say we had to have a perfect writing. Everything was done in English so we always had to write in English.

S52's willingness to talk at length, even with no prompting from T13, may have stemmed in part from her comfort in an English-language setting, even though S52 had been a university student in the United States for just a few months. In addition, S52 also articulated that she believed it was her responsibility to identify problems and to come up with solutions. When asked in a post-conference interview whether T13 had supplied "different ways" that S52 could "reword things," S52 asserted that T13 was there only to verify her decisions:

S52: I think since I'm the one who came here to learn so I was the one who came up with options because I was like, "Is it fine if I add this?" And I think [T13] helped me put the right sentence and right words.

S52 seemed particularly determined to make decisions about writing for herself—as opposed to deferring to her tutor's judgment about what might be the best course of action. This motivation seemed to override any potential effects of her relative lack of familiarity with the writing center.

### **VLT Content Types**

Our findings show that the content types of student writers' VLTs ranged widely. We first discuss the content types in the VLTs of the NESs. Then, in the next subsection, we discuss NNEs' VLTs.

#### ***NESs' VLT Content Types***

Table 5 shows the distribution of the content types across the VLTs (numbered in order of their appearance in the conference) in the NESs' eight



conferences. It also indicates whether each VLT occurred in the opening stage, the teaching stage, or the closing stage.

**Table 5**  
*Content Types in NES Student Writers' VLTs*

Conference Stage	T15-S50	T16-S56	T10-S35	T14-S47	T12-S40	T10-S63	T13-S44	T17-S54
Opening stage		1, 3	1, 6			3		
		2, 3						
		6						
Teaching stage	8, 9	10, 9	5	5, 7	3, 9			
	1, 8	9	10, 6	2				
	8, 3	6, 8	5					
	8, 2	6	5					
	1, 8	6, 8						
	8							
Closing stage	8	11						
	2, 8							
	5, 8							
	5, 8							
	2, 5, 8							
	1, 2							

Note. Each cell represents a single VLT. The numbers refer to the following content types:

1. Background information on the writing task
2. Background on their process of and concerns about developing their papers
3. Statement of goals for the conference
4. Statement of a sentence-level goal
5. Explanation of subject matter relevant to the paper
6. Description of the current state of the paper
7. Clarification of the intended meaning behind existing words, sentences, and paragraphs

8. Description of potential content for the paper, including contribution of spoken written-language
9. Questions to tutor
10. Reading from the paper
11. Statement of postconference actions

Table 5 shows that, although stating goals for the conference (content type 3) did not occur most frequently overall, it occurred five times across four NES conferences, thus occurring in more conferences than any other content type. This content type lends itself to producing student writer VLTs in that conference goals arise, at least in part and potentially wholly, from student writer knowledge. That is, times when student writers must be the ones to supply information to the conversation are times when student writers are more likely to produce VLTs. For example, in the opening stage of the T10-S63 conference,<sup>12</sup> S63 told T10 what he wanted to get out of the conference:

Excerpt 5

S63: *Employer report. So here's, uh, what the assignment is supposed to be right here. I guess all I was concerned with is, she wants us to use uh footnotes. I wanted to be sure I used the footnotes correctly. I don't know if you know anything about footnotes.*

Indeed, in NESs' VLTs, three out of five occurrences of stating goals for the conference occurred in the opening stage. This finding jibes with prior research that has found that student writers are more voluble than tutors in the opening stage (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b, p. 70) and makes sense in that tutors and student writers, according to writing center script, negotiate the goals of the conference in the conference's opening stage.

In NESs' talk, providing background on writing process and concerns about developing the paper (type 2) occurred seven times across three NES conferences. Unlike stating goals for the conference (type 3), providing background on writing process and concerns about developing the paper (type 2) occurred just once out of seven occurrences in the opening stage of NESs' conferences. Although it may seem the agenda-setting goal of the opening stage would have lent itself to providing background on the writing process and concerns about developing the paper (type 2), this type of information could be provided any time the student writer felt the need to relate a sequence of events or a concern that had led up to some decision reflected in the paper

<sup>12</sup> The audiorecording for this conference begins with this turn from S63, meaning that T10's first turn was lost as the audiorecorder was not turned on at the outset of the conference.

under discussion. Such was the case in the T14-S47 conference when S47 and T14 had just finished reading through the paper together. T14 provided an overarching assessment, observing that S47 had failed to make a claim about what gender is, saying “I feel like that might not be a strong enough, like, point.” T14 then buffered this negative news with a compliment, calling S47’s paper “nice,” but then reinforced her criticism: “So I think that, like, you- you have a nice paper. Um, but it kind of strays from the question that was asked, you know?” In the 85-word VLT that followed, S47 reacted to T14’s assessment, providing some background on her process of writing the paper:

Excerpt 6

S47: *Yeah. See, see you got me confused because the last one I got back, critical gender moment, I mean I got a B plus but she said- I said, “Was it the, uh, the grammar that held me back?” because that’s where I had the two little checks. Grammar and citation. You know, when I got an A minus and she said, “Well I want you to talk more about you.” And we didn’t get this back until the end of class on Tuesday, so-*

In this excerpt, S47’s VLT related the backstory of the paper, describing the feedback and grades that she had received before that had led her to make the decisions she had about the content of the paper that she and T14 had just read together. In this case, a student writer’s explanation of the lead-up to her paper came about when the tutor stated what was, in her view, the conference’s main take-away: The paper had strayed from the assignment. In sum, while the objectives of the opening stage lent themselves to content type 2, an assessment even late in the conference could trigger such a VLT. Nevertheless, like stating goals for the conference (type 3), providing background on writing process and concerns about developing the paper (type 2) seemed to arise out of the knowledge that student writers brought to the writing center; they knew what they had accomplished so far on the writing task and knew the difficulties that they were having in completing the task.

Like providing background on writing process and concerns about developing the paper (type 2), explanations of the paper’s subject matter (type 5) also occurred seven times across three NES conferences. However, it did not occur in the opening stage. At the points in the NES conferences in which this type of VLT occurred, the student writers needed to provide their tutors with background knowledge about the paper’s subject matter in order to explain what they had written, which would in turn help the tutor supply advice. For example, T10 asked S35 a question to clarify S35’s assessment of the *New Yorker* article he had evaluated in the paper (“So, he’s, like, just straddling the line the whole time?”), and S35 responded with an explanation of the paper’s subject matter—the wishy-washy article:

## Excerpt 7

S35: *Yeah. Like, he doesn't even reference his question in the entire article. If you wouldn't have read the subtext, like, the subtitle, you wouldn't have known there was an argument here. You would've just thought it was, like, to give you random facts about the college.*

In the case of this content type, again, student writers expressed background knowledge to which tutors had no access.

The content type that occurred more frequently in NESs' talk than any other, describing potential content for the paper (type 8), occurred 11 times in just one conference: T15-S50. As mentioned previously, S50 was a highly motivated student who had worked frequently with T15 before, but something else set the T15-S50 conference apart: S50 had not yet written the paper. Rather, she wanted the tutor to help her settle on a topic for a literature review and to formulate a thesis statement for the review. She also wanted T15 to help her use the library's databases so that she could find peer-reviewed research. In short, S50 was ready to discuss the paper's potential content. In the teaching stage and in the closing stage, she and T15 did just that, and, 11 times during the conference, S50 used an entire or part of a VLT to describe potential content for her as-yet-unwritten paper, as she did in the (teaching-stage) talk in Excerpt 8.

## Excerpt 8

S50: *Uh, ok. Uh. See, I need to talk about myself in here but, like, I was going to talk about like growing up I had friends with mental and physical disabilities, but I didn't know if I should add that or if I should add, because I did like academic service learning before with, um, students that, um, had mental disabilities. Um, so I don't know if want to-*

In this brainstorming- and secondary-source-focused conference, S50 combined descriptions of potential content for her paper (type 8) with other content types, particularly providing background on writing process and concerns about developing the paper (type 2) and explanations of the paper's subject matter (type 5). In sum, S50 used VLTs more frequently than any other student writer—even within the closing stage<sup>13</sup>—likely because she was highly

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13 That S50 produced six VLTs in the closing stage of her conference attests to the complexity of the closing stage. Thonus (2016), drawing on Mihyon Jeon (2003), explained the five (potentially iterative) phases that comprise closings: shutting down, preclosing, thanking, terminal, and reopening. The closing stage of the T15-S50 conference contained reopening phases that prolonged the closing stage and made S50's VLTs possible.

motivated, and her motivation led her to think about what a literature review on ableism might contain.

***NNES' VLT Content Types***

As previously noted, NNESs contributed fewer VLTs, with one student writer (S52) contributing five out of eight VLTs that appeared in just three of the eight NNES conferences. Table 6 shows the distribution of content types across the VLTs in the NNESs' eight conferences. As Table 6 shows, all of the eight NNES VLTs occurred in the teaching stage; none appeared in the opening stage or the closing stage.

**Table 6**  
*Content Types in NNES Student Writers' VLTs*

Conference Stage	T13-S52	T18-S65	T16-S58	T10-S43	T12-S75	T13-S61	T15-S51	T17-S68
Opening stage								
Teaching stage	10, 7	10, 4	5					
	7	8, 10						
	4, 10, 8							
	10							
	9							
Closing stage								

*Note.* Each cell represents a single VLT. The numbers refer to the following content types:

1. Background information on the writing task
2. Background on their process of and concerns about developing their papers
3. Statement of goals for the conference
4. Statement of a sentence-level goal
5. Explanation of subject matter relevant to the paper
6. Description of the current state of the paper
7. Clarification of the intended meaning behind existing words, sentences, and paragraphs
8. Description of potential content for the paper, including contribution of spoken written-language

9. Questions to tutor
10. Reading from the paper
11. Statement of postconference actions

In the three NNES conferences that contained a VLT, three content types appeared in two conferences (T13-S52 and T18-S65): descriptions of potential content for the paper (type 8), reading aloud (type 10), and statement of a sentence-level goal (type 4). When the NNES student writers stated a sentence-level goal, they addressed their goals at the microlevel, such as when S65 explained why she used a semicolon to join two independent clauses:

Excerpt 9

S65: *Just need a semicolon. And then there's one more semicolon here. "Fortunately, my friends are nice; they try to help me." Because I want to organize. I want to write this sentence for why they are nice. Why do I think they are nice. So that's why I put the semicolon.*

In this VLT, S65 read aloud (type 10) to help draw T18's attention to the spot in the paper that she wanted to discuss.

Reading aloud appeared in the T13-S52 and T18-S65 conferences as well. In one topic episode, S52 explained some confusion her writing instructor had expressed in relation to S52's use of the words "daughter" and "granddaughter." She told T13, "We [Nepalese speakers] use the same word." Later, in another VLT, S52 first read aloud from her paper (type 10), then explained what she meant by the phrase "parental grandparents" (type 7)<sup>14</sup> a phrase related to her earlier use of "daughter" and "granddaughter":

Excerpt 10

S52: *"I [unclear] recall my grandparents were on [unclear]." Yeah. So here, I wasn't- Um, well, at first I- in the first here- my first paper. I had- I talked about like, "We are my parents or grandparents." So, the grandmother I'm talking about is the eldest one among my parental grandparents.*

Here and in her other uses of reading out loud, S52, like S65, seemed to use reading as a sort of launching pad for further discussion.

### VLT Triggers

In this section, we examine the tutor talk that seemed to trigger student writers' VLTs. We start by examining tutors' questions, which earlier research

14 S52 meant "paternal" grandparents. T13 came to this understanding and supplied the correct word to S52 several turns later.

has suggested to be a promising means of prompting student writers to participate in their conferences (e.g., Rosé, Bhembé, Siler, Srivastava, & VanLehn, 2003; Smith & Higgins, 2006; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b). Then, we examine the tutoring strategies that preceded student writers' VLTs, such as suggesting and explaining.<sup>15</sup> Finally, we look at the VLTs that were not preceded by a question or tutoring strategy to determine the other contexts that led student writers to contribute substantial turns at talk.

### ***Tutor Questions as VLT Triggers***

The 31 VLTs produced by NESs occurred in four (50%) of the eight NES conferences. Of the VLTs that NESs produced, eight (25.8%) were preceded by a tutor question; one of these VLTs was preceded by two questions. Of these VLTs:

- three were preceded by pumping questions,
- three were preceded by social-coordination questions,
- two were preceded by knowledge-deficit questions, and
- one was preceded by a conversation-control question.

Excerpt 11 illustrates how, after several turns devoted to working out a misunderstanding, T14's pumping question and social-coordination question combined to prompt a VLT from S47:

Excerpt 11

- T14: **Do you want to read that sentence over? Does that sound a little odd to you?**
- S47: Probably. I was trying to make it not sound too stupid.  
[laughs]
- T14: You don't sound stupid.
- S47: No. Him, [you know?
- T14: [Oh.
- S47: Him being narrow, but-
- T14: Oh.
- S47: *But he's actually- He is what he is. He's eighty, but [unclear] so it was easier to be accepting of them. I don't know. I'm trying to say that I don't know how he would've acted if they would've been like right in his life, but since they didn't- They weren't around him- He didn't- He's like, "Yeah, that's fine. They can do whatever they want to do" kind of thing. So-*

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15 As noted above, pumping questions are both questions and tutoring strategies. We counted them with questions rather than with tutoring strategies so as not to count them twice in our count of VLT triggers.

This excerpt shows how T14 triggered S47's VLT by first prompting S47 to read the sentence again and then prompting him to consider the idea that the sentence was not clearly written. Then, S47 went on to clarify the intended meaning behind what he had written (type 7).

Four of the VLTs preceded by questions occurred in the conference between T10 and S35. S35's writing instructor had already read the paper, in which, as noted earlier, S35 analyzed a *New Yorker* article. More specifically, the assignment called on S35 to evaluate the strength of the author's argument. In trying to understand the article's main claim and supporting evidence, T10 asked two knowledge-deficit questions, including the one in Excerpt 12 that asked S35 about the author's stance.

Excerpt 12

T10: **So, he's like, just straddling the line the whole time?**

S35: *Yeah. Like, he'll put in a bunch of random facts. Like, it's supposed to be as, um, St- uh, Stanford. Is it too close to the business industry or not? And he put in there that- How people had, um, dinner with the president and just a bunch of random things that-*

T10's knowledge-deficit question triggered S35's explanation of the subject matter (type 5), in this case, an article that argued universities have become beholden to big business. T10 also asked two pumping questions that similarly triggered two VLTs from S47. The other four VLTs preceded by tutor questions were divided among three conferences: one in T14-S47 (preceded by two questions); one in T15-S50; and two in T15-S56.

In contrast to the NESs' VLTs, only one out of the total eight NNESS' VLTs was preceded by a question. Like S35, S58 had also come to the writing center for help with an essay that was supposed to argue whether the author had supported their claim. The claim in question was this: Technology cannot fix the problems in the educational system of the United States. S58 had come to the writing center because her writing instructor had told her that her essay summarized the article as opposed to evaluating how well its author supported his claim. T16 asked S58 a pumping question, spurring S58 to think out loud about the potential audience for the article:

Excerpt 13

T16: **Who's kind of his target ar- audience, do you think?**

S58: *I don't know. I think all the people that believes that technology is going to like, fix all the problems of education and students are going to be, are going to love school because of technology and- Every like, poor kid in every place has the work and like, access to Google.*



T16's pumping question in Excerpt 13 attempted to prompt S58 to think out loud about the article's likely audience. In her VLT response, S58 explained her understanding of the subject matter (type 5), her understanding of whom those people might be.

This study showed that tutor questions were not a substantial trigger for student writers' VLTs. Only nine (23%) of NESs' and NNESSs' student writers' total 39 VLTs were triggered by a question (and one was triggered by two questions). That said, prior research showing the utility of pumping questions for prompting student writers' active participation (e.g., Smith & Higgins, 2006; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b) was somewhat supported here: Four of the nine VLTs preceded by questions were preceded by pumping questions. When tutors did ask a question that triggered a VLT, that question was nearly half the time a pumping question.

### ***Tutoring Strategies as VLT Triggers***

Tutoring strategies played some role in triggering VLTs in three of the NES conferences: T14-S47, T15-S50, and T16-S56. In particular, tutoring strategies played a substantial role in the two NES conferences that contained the most VLTs: T15-S50 and T16-S56. These two conferences contained 22 out of NESs' total 31 VLTs (71%), 12 in T15-S50 and 10 in T16-S56. Indeed, 10 of the 12 VLTs in T15-S50 were preceded by a tutoring strategy, which included suggesting, explaining, demonstrating, and responding as a reader/listener. Seven of these 10 were preceded by a suggesting strategy. Suggesting strategies, according to Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018b), are mitigated in force, often through modal verbs such as "could" and "might" (p. 60). Excerpt 14 exemplifies a suggesting strategy ("Like you could talk about how they're trying") that triggered a VLT from S50:

Excerpt 14

T15: **Like you could talk about how they're trying-**

S50: Mmhm.

T15: **Like they're there to get help but-**

S50: *And also the influx of people because I think that they're getting people like every day and some people when I was looking through the overnight papers, some people are only there for like one night and then they leave and they never come back. And so it's really like a place for them to stay whereas like we're trying to help them, you know, stay more.*

Excerpt 14 is indicative of the way that S50 built upon T15's tutoring strategies. T15 suggested potential content for the paper ("Like they're there to get help but"); in response to this suggestion and other tutoring strategies, S50 provided a "yes, and" response, in this case, adding "And also the influx

of people.” Indeed, 11 of the 12 VLTs in the T15-S50 conference contained descriptions of potential content for the paper (type 8). S50 acknowledged what T15 said and then moved the ball forward with her own ideas for what the paper might contain. In this case, she pointed out that in addition to T15’s suggestion that she write about the way that the nonprofit organization was trying to help people, she could also write about the influx of people that the organization takes in each night. S50’s internal motivation to develop her ideas and improve her writing were likely contributors to her willingness to build upon T15’s contributions to focus her papers and develop their content.

In the T16-S56 conference, only three out of the 10 VLTs were triggered by tutoring strategies, a result that might have stemmed from S56’s lack of familiarity with the typical conference script. As mentioned previously, the first three VLTs in S56’s conference occurred in the conference’s opening stage and seemed to stem from the fact that S56 did not know he could count on the tutor to suss out his goals. Without conversational assistance—without prompting from a question or a tutoring strategy—S56 explained his situation and his goals at some length. Similarly, S56’s closing-stage VLT might have been connected to his lack of familiarity with the typical conference script. After T16 asked him a social-coordination question (“So, do you want me to email any, or, I suppose it’s for a scholarship application so you wouldn’t need to email anybody”), a question to close down the conference, S56 responded with a VLT:

Excerpt 15

S56: *Yeah, I don't think so. I'm- Once- I'll kind of go through it again and if I have any other questions I would like, come back, and then I would just need to get, to have it signed by like the professor that I did it for their class, when I did it. So I was going to have him- Like, I'll bring it to him and he can do that. Um, that's kind of the last thing before I'll submit it. Then I guess- Yeah. So-*

In this VLT, S56 noted that he would return to the writing center if other questions arose, but then he switched gears to describe a different possible postconference action he would have to take before submitting the paper as part of his scholarship application—he would need to get a signature from the instructor for whom he wrote the paper. The second part of this VLT, of course, wasn’t relevant to T16’s institutional role. More to the point, S56’s VLT response diverted sharply from student writers’ common response to tutors’ conference-ending social-coordination questions (e.g., “Do you have any other questions?”): “No, thanks.”

That said, T16’s tutoring strategies did seem to act as triggers to S56’s VLTs in the teaching stage. In the talk excerpted next, T16 used three tutoring

strategies to trigger a single VLT from S56: a reading-aloud strategy (cognitive scaffolding), an empathy strategy (motivational scaffolding), and an explaining strategy (instruction). These strategies triggered a VLT from S56 that described the current state of the paper (type 6) and described potential content for the paper (type 8):

Excerpt 16

T16: Um, I guess my issue with this sentence is here “So is the amount of hotels that are needed for, so attendance at the games is pretty stable.” Yeah, it’s just kind of like a picky grammatical thing. I mean I know what you are trying to say, [but I have to like insert that ‘almost’ and I don’t really

S56: [It’s not clear-

T16: want to put words in your mouth.

[Um-

S56: [*Yep, I see what you mean because this is- They’re kind of different ideas. This is about the people- [unclear] people that go, but this should be about, um, the amount. This should be the amount of like, what hotels. Yeah. Like, rooms available and kind of like about what the hotels are going to take in.*

In response to T16’s reading-aloud strategy, intended to help S56 perceive the “grammatical thing” that was the “issue” in the sentence, S56 showed that he understood the problem that T16 had tried to identify by comparing what he had written to what he could write instead.<sup>16</sup>

In the NNESS’ conferences, two of the eight VLTs were triggered by a tutoring strategy. Both of these occurred in T18-S65—a conference in which S65 and T18 discussed a paper about challenges to S65’s writing process. Before two of S65’s VLTs, T18 used a telling strategy<sup>17</sup> and, as Excerpt 17 shows, a suggesting strategy:

16 Whether the SWL that S56 generated would actually address the grammatical issue that T16 had raised is another matter.

17 Telling strategies, according to Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018b), “are the clearest in conveying the speaker’s intended meaning” because they are the least mitigated (p. 60); they include unmitigated directives, such as “Move this paragraph to the end” as well as directives employing modal verbs such as “should” that convey obligation to comply (p. 60) and opinion-statements such as “I would move this paragraph to the end” (p. 60).

Excerpt 17

T18: **Maybe, 'I have to.' Maybe, 'my perspective' instead of 'ours.'**

S65: *'My perspective, they also have to research a high quality essay.' "Everybody who deserves this should be credible. Furthermore, most papers are harder to read." "Therefore I have to more concentrate on the writing schedule." "To improve my writing process, I write after I finish my homework and make an appointment at the writing center to make my paper a better structure."*

In this VLT response to T18's suggesting strategy, S65 intertwined reading aloud her existing text (type 10) with incorporation of T18's suggestions (type 8). By incorporating T18's suggestions—revising out loud—S65 used what Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018a) called spoken-written language, or SWL. SWL, they wrote, is “the spoken language that both tutors and student writers produce for potential use in the student writer's written product” (p. 47; see also Denny, 2018; Mackiewicz, 2018). S65 used SWL to test the grammaticality of the sentences for herself and to give T18 an opportunity to confirm or correct the revision.

### ***No Questions or Tutoring Strategies as VLT Triggers***

As in Mackiewicz's (2018) study of 100-word turns in student writers' talk, this study found that some VLTs were not preceded by a question or tutoring-strategy trigger. Of NESs' 31 VLTs, nine (29%) were not preceded by a trigger. Of NNESSs' eight VLTs, five (63%) were not preceded by a trigger. However, it's important to note that in the case of NESs, five of the nine untriggered VLTs occurred in the T16-S56 conference. As discussed previously, S56's lack of familiarity with the typical conference script seemed to generate some of his VLTs, such as the three that occurred in his conference's opening stage.

Even more striking, all untriggered VLTs in the NNESSs' talk (i.e., five out of the five) occurred in just one conference: T13-S52. As noted before, the T13-S52 conference contained the most VLTs overall. With two of these VLTs, S52 started a new topic episode. Excerpt 18 shows an example. T13 and S52 had just finished a topic episode, and T13 hesitated for a moment afterward (“And then so-”). After T13's hesitation, S52 launched into a new topic episode. In this VLT, she asserted her goal for the next sentence (type 4), read that sentence aloud (type 10) and then described potential content for the paper (type 8):

Excerpt 18

- T13: And then, so ...
- S52: *With these, I want to make a better phrase out of this. "She had a heart of a baby even though she was eighty-eight years old." I mean to compare like, even though she was old, she was so sensitive on the inside.*
- T13: Mmhm.
- S52: But I couldn't put it in words, so I just used this. But this didn't turn out to be that great.

The VLT in Excerpt 18 exemplifies how S52 took responsibility for the progression of the conference, moving it forward by raising a new topic.

In other VLT cases, S52 expanded on topics that she had raised. In one case, S52's VLT posed questions based on questions she had just asked, questions seeking to clarify when she needed to use a comma between two clauses, as Excerpt 19 shows:

Excerpt 19

- S52: "... people around, and I was the last among them. I was too scared to"- Um, "[unclear]" So is comma fine here? Because I don't understand, like, sometimes it is fine.
- T13: "A [unclear] number of people had gathered in her house to receive her blessing." Ok, so that's an independent.
- S52: That's why it's right?
- T13: Mmhm, yep. This comma's fine.
- S52: *So, when there's dependent, do we use? To dependent clause? Like, "As I got here," comma, "she had already left for school," maybe? "As I got home, she had already al- When I got home, my sister had already left for school." Then do I use comma like, after "As I got home?" Because I have this habit.*
- T13: No.

S52's VLT in Excerpt 19 reveals how she posed questions as she engaged in working on the phrasing of her writing. This VLT also clearly supported the assertion that S52 made in her postconference interview: She wanted to supply possible words and phrases herself and then have her tutor verify whether those possibilities were indeed grammatically correct.

## Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed the VLTs of eight NES and eight NNES student writers who worked with eight experienced and trained writing center tutors in 16 conferences. Our goals were to examine the frequency with which NESs and NNESs contributed VLTs, to code the content of those VLTs, and to examine the triggers of those VLTs as well. In this last goal, we wanted to deter-

mine the extent to which tutors' questions and tutoring strategies appeared to trigger student writers' VLTs and to better understand other potential factors that may have triggered student writers' substantial turns at talk and, thus, their active participation—findings which would have implications for writing center practice, particularly tutor training.

We found that NESs contributed more VLTs than NNEs: 31 compared to 8. In addition, we found that six NES conferences contained VLTs, compared to just three of NNEs conferences. Further, 2.6% of NESs' turns were VLTs, but only 0.5% of NNEs' turns were VLTs. Clearly, and not surprisingly, the NES student writers maintained the conversational floor to a greater extent than NNEs did.

In analyzing the content of NESs' 31 VLTs, we found a good deal of variation. VLTs that stated goals for the conference (type 3) occurred in four out of eight NES conferences, specifically, in the opening stage. The NES student writers substantially contributed to the conference talk when they had an opportunity to talk about what they would like to get out of the conference. We also found, however, that no VLTs occurred in the opening stage of NNEs' conferences. Because stating goals for the conference (type 3) can facilitate student writers' active participation, tutors should pay attention to helping student writers, particularly NNEs, to articulate their goals at the outset. In doing so, they might also set a precedent for the rest of the conference, revealing to student writers that their contributions to the conference are welcome and beneficial.

In addition, two content types occurred in three out of eight NES conferences: stating background about the writing process and concerns about developing the paper (type 2) and explaining the paper's subject matter (type 5). Unlike stating goals for the conference (type 3), these types of VLT content could appear at any point in the conference, including the closing stage (as in the case of conference T15-S50). Tutors who want to help student writers to maintain the conversational floor, then, might provide opportunities for student writers to explain their writing process and their concerns about it and to discuss the subject matter of their writing, such as S35's explication of the *New Yorker* author's argument.

In relation to the three NNEs conferences that contained VLTs, we found that two contained reading from the paper (type 10). While reading aloud certainly is not the same as conversing about writing, it does in fact appear to serve a purpose. Student writers can use reading aloud to focus the conversation on a particular phrase or sentence, as S52 did when she started a new topic episode with a VLT (see Excerpt 19). With reading aloud, then, student writers also give tutors an opportunity to evaluate the read-aloud text and, simultaneously, a springboard for providing alternatives. Of course, not all student writers are like S52, who was clearly motivated to formulate and

revise her writing. To help avoid a conference characterized by sequences of the student writer reading aloud, the tutor providing potential wording (SWL), and the student writer adopting the tutor's SWL uncritically, tutors might ask student writers whether, upon reading a phrase or sentence again, they perceive an error or unnatural phrasing. Asking such a question would, at least, give student writers an opportunity to analyze their texts for themselves. In some cases, student writers will not perceive what tutors perceive, but sometimes, given a moment to think, they will.

The third component of our study investigated VLT triggers, particularly tutor questions and tutoring strategies. Questions are the main tool that tutors have for ceding the conversational floor and showing a willingness to listen. Of the eight VLTs the NNEs produced, only one (12.5%) was preceded by a question, but of the 31 VLTs that NESs produced, eight (26%) were preceded by a tutor question. More specifically, four of these eight VLTs were preceded by a pumping question. As explained previously, pumping questions, in addition to being questions, are cognitive scaffolding strategies: They push student writers forward in their thinking. Tutors might pay particular attention to the types of questions they ask and aim to pose more pumping questions, such as T16's pumping question to NNEs S58 ("Who's kind of his target audience, do you think?"), which triggered S58's only VLT (see Excerpt 13). Given the limited number of VLTs that student writers, particularly NNEs, produced, pumping questions are no guarantee that student writers will, in response to them, hold the conversational floor for a substantial turn at talk. However, in this study, they seemed to facilitate such contributions. Thus, tutor training should point out the importance of such questions, which push student writers to formulate potential solutions for themselves.

Of the NESs' 31 VLTs, 14 (45%) were preceded by a tutoring strategy, and of the NNEs' eight VLTs, two (25%) were preceded by a tutoring strategy. Among the NES conferences, tutoring strategies played the strongest role in T15-S50, in which 10 of 12 VLTs were preceded by a tutoring strategy. Of these 10 VLTs, seven were preceded by a suggesting strategy. As discussed previously, S50 had been to the writing center many times before, and she was very familiar with T15. She was also highly motivated to succeed in her writing both in and out of her classes. When presented with a suggestion, S50 acknowledged the suggestion and then built upon it, modifying T15's suggestion or adding to it. Because she contributed "yes, and" responses to suggestions and other tutoring strategies, she maintained the conversational floor at length. Tutors cannot limit themselves to working with student writers with whom they are familiar, nor can they work solely with highly motivated student writers such as S50. They can, however, aim to check in with student writers—likely with pumping questions—who do not respond like S50 did, especially student writers who uncritically accept suggestions.



This study, like Mackiewicz's (2018) study of student writers' 100-word turns, found that nine (29%) of NES' VLTs and five (63%) of NNEs' VLTs were not preceded by a question or a tutoring strategy. All five of those untriggered NNEs' VLTs occurred in one conference: T13-S52. S52's VLTs revealed her willingness to raise topics and, sometimes, to revise phrases and sentences herself, allowing T13 to evaluate those revisions rather than supplying them. Analysis of S52's VLTs made clear that some student writers, particularly highly motivated ones, are more likely to take and sustain the conversational floor and, concomitantly, actively participate in their conferences.

The tutors who participated in this comparative study had received training, including training in working with ESL students, and had at least one year of tutoring experience. Even with these credentials, the conferences that they had with NES and NNEs' student writers did not trigger many student writer VLTs. This signal of student writers' active participation, then, did not materialize very often. While it's true that active participation involves more than volubility, tutors should attend to their talk and enter tutoring work with the intention of drawing student writers out, prompting them to talk about matters that readily fall into the realm of their domain knowledge: goals for the conference itself, background of and concerns about their writing process, and potential content for the paper.

To conclude, we set the threshold for a VLT lower than Mackiewicz (2018) did in her study of 100-word turns; even so, we still identified just 39 VLTs. This study has suggested, then, that we have a long way to go in effectively prompting and encouraging student writers to talk at length.

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## Appendix: Transcription Conventions

This study employed orthographic transcription. The following extralinguistic features were transcribed in addition to the spoken words:

- VLTs, with italics
- Silent reading, with “reading silently” in brackets, as in [reading silently]
- Occurrences of unintelligible talk, with “unclear” in brackets, as in [unclear]
- Laughter, with “laughs” in brackets, as in [laughs]
- Pauses longer than one second, with the number of seconds in brackets, as in [2s]
- Pauses one second or less, with a comma
- Rising intonation for an inquiry, with a question mark
- Cut off speech, with a hyphen

## Submission to Writing Center Journal

- Reference to a word as a word, with double quotation marks, as in the following example:

S: I had “tell” but the computer wouldn’t let me do “tell.” It kept underlining it and saying “tells.”
- Occurrences of overlapping talk, denoted with brackets as in the following exchange:

T: Ok. Alright. Well, thanks for coming by. I’ll give you your stuff back here. And I just keep this so I can put it in the computer. [So. But, um, you have a good day

S: [Uhhuh.

T: and I hope that it goes well for you.
- Occurrences of reading aloud, with double quotation marks, as in the following example:

T: “For example, in the article, there is an example.”  
Uh, you could say...
- Spoken written-language (SWL), with single quotation marks, as in the following example:

S: ‘Like, one character, Momma Gump,’  
dot dot dot.

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