



## BECOMING A WRITING TUTOR AS AN ESL STUDENT: Why Take the Risks?

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Growing up in the Philippines, I wasn't good at writing in English. My mom only finished two years of college. She really wanted me to excel, so in elementary, a private tutor wrote my essays for me. I still have the original copies of those essays.

I was 12 when I arrived in Kodiak, Alaska on May 19th, 2009. I spoke two Philippine dialects, Ilocano and Tagalog, yet little English. I knew that if I was to succeed in this new country I would have to overcome a tremendous struggle with the new language and culture.

Throughout middle school, I was timid in expressing my ideas with others because I wasn't yet fluent in English and wanted to give up. In 7th grade, while in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes with other immigrant students, I was encouraged to weave my personal experience into my essays and conversations, but it was art that ultimately served as a bridge for creatively connecting with others. Making art felt natural because I had done it all my life. At the age of six I had the opportunity to take art classes every summer until 6th grade. In addition to my evolving writing skills, I had my drawing abilities to lean on when communicating my ideas and opinions in English became challenging. My ESL teacher encouraged me to enter one of my drawings into a national art contest which required me to write an artistic statement to accompany it. I won the contest, and being recognized by my school gave me confidence and motivated me to enthusiastically begin having conversations with fellow students. These interactions helped me adapt to the new school system. Through this difficult but rewarding process, I gained a deeper understanding of myself and was inspired to further develop my writing and speaking skills.

Like drawing, writing is a way of expressing myself. Ideas in my mind flow through my hands as my pen glides across the paper to form sentences. Both drawing and writing are the translation of an idea into signs and symbols. Writing is drawing with words—like shapes and colors, words can conjure memories and emotions.

But in my current academic writings, I still tend to lose my own voice, devalue it, and tailor it for the teacher. It almost seems like I've become that private tutor who used to write my essays and control the stories I shared. I forget that I am the author and have control over my own writing, the story I am willing to share and tell—I forget that I am the illustrator of my own art.

As a first-year student, I was hesitant to approach the front desk at the Writing Center. I didn't know how to make an appointment with a peer tutor and felt vulnerable having someone read my unfinished drafts. However, my strong desire to have a companion, to have someone to collaborate with on expanding my ideas, pushed me to speak.

The first visit and the weekly appointments that followed were spent with encouraging and thoughtful peer tutors that helped cultivate my writing voice. Sharing my undeveloped work felt risky because I was afraid of being viewed as a bad writer, but the investment in myself was worth it. When I encounter a challenging assignment, I often think back to all the hurdles I've gone through so far and how I was able to successfully finish even a 15-page research paper with the help of a peer tutor. Writing is the reciprocity of ideas, conversations, and questions.

Most of my writings freshman year were done in collaboration with a writing tutor unless I was writing in my journal. I learned strategies for creative organization and how to weave my personal experiences into my writing. This positive support motivated me to take another risky yet rewarding journey: to become a peer writing tutor at the Writing Center.

For a person immigrating to the United States who speaks a language other than English, in a space dominated by white, English-speaking students, it's intimidating to become a writing tutor. I was once an ESL student that struggled to work on my essays alone. I had to disprove the assumption that ESL students don't have anything to offer to the Writing Center. I had to quiet my fears that my skills would be insufficient. It felt risky to join a group of people where I was a minority. But because I had a positive experience, I wanted to pay it forward. I wanted to support others in developing their own writing, because writing is powerful and provides access to power.

While writing this article I realized that I want to tell other immigrants and ESL students they shouldn't fear the Writing Center, that they are welcome and valued there. Most new immigrants who come to America feel they are not good at speaking. More often than not, the way you write seems even worse. Red ink on your work, you're forced into a writing center, and forced to work with an expert to "correct" your writing. When students are faced with these negative experiences, they are deprived of the possibility to enjoy writing as a transformative way to express themselves. I could have been discouraged by negative experiences with tutors and teachers. But instead, I had encouraging conversations while working with tutors and went on to become one myself.

When faced with a writer, I can be viewed as an expert—someone who knows it all—from brainstorming and organization to thesis creation, citation, and grammar. This puts me in another vulnerable position since I am, like most students, still strengthening and learning to value my own writing voice. Being a tutor is risky because I can be judged as a bad tutor who is not very helpful.

But I've learned it is not my job to be an expert. It is my job to be there as a companion who will ask leading questions that expand your ideas and transform your view of your writing.

Sharing my own writing experiences with the writers I work with serves as a reminder that they are not alone in the process and also emphasizes that in order to move forward, both the writer and the peer tutor have to face their fears. I was once that kid who had a writing tutor write my essays, that ESL student who struggled to communicate ideas and opinions with others but utilized art, that hesitant and vulnerable writer who risked hours with peer tutors in developing my writing, and I know how overwhelming it can feel. But one thing's for sure, I won't be that tutor that will write your essays for you because I know, like the quote engraved on the pens and pencils at the Writing Center, "You have something to say . . ." and I want to empower you to value your own voice.

I learned to believe that it is the unique voice in each of us that needs to be heard. It is the ideas forming, hovering in our minds, which must be written on paper, typed on a blank screen, or painted on a canvas. You are the one in control over your own writing, the author of the story you are willing to share and tell, the illustrator of your own art.

