Because one of our goals at the Michigan State Writing Center is to reflect upon our practices, we frequently ask ourselves, "What worked so well with this client?" or "What could work better next time?" Often, these questions arise when we are working with English as Second Language (ESL) students. One of the recurring questions in our writing center is, "Why is consulting with non-native speakers so different from consulting with native English speakers?"

In her article, "Individualized Instruction in Writing Centers: Attending to Cross-Cultural Differences," Muriel Harris suggests that one of the main differences between native, and non-native texts is a difference in rhetorical patterns. Sometimes, differences in logic, topic development, or argumentation, can make the paper written by a non-native speaker of English look flawed to an American reader. Judith Powers comes to the same conclusions in her article, "Re-thinking Strategies with ESL Writers." Powers’ solution for consulting with non-native writers, is to use a more directed approach. She believes the help non-native speakers
seek “looks very much like the ‘bad’ kind of help that native speakers sometimes want when they bring their papers in to be ‘corrected’.” Thus, there is a feeling of uneasiness between the consultant and the client.

According to Powers, then, instructional editing is an appropriate response so that non-native English speaking clients can develop the skill with grammar and punctuation that native speakers often intuitively employ. Still, constant use of instructional editing comes uncomfortably close to the
more directive style that we try to avoid and such directness may mask fundamental differences in rhetorical values, inadvertently blocking accurate communication. In addition, various cross-cultural variations, such as response time or eye contact, may exacerbate the miscommunication already effected by a consultation that is too direct (Wang).

Committed as we are to Jeff Brooks’ minimalist approach, as outlined in “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work,” our particular pedagogy tells us to avoid becoming the teacher in our writing conferences; we would rather be the listening ear. Greater directness, we fear, could compromise our goal of creating a better writer through talk (North). The consultant’s dilemma, then, is this: Do we ignore our minimalist instincts and give a non-native writer direct answers, thus changing consulting to teaching? Or, do we refuse to assume the teacher’s role and then feel like the session was ineffective? In this article, we wish to present an alternative. We question the necessity of shifting our role from peer to teacher and suggest, instead, that a cultural dialogue about writing and rhetoric may prove to be a useful collaborative strategy to use with non-native English speakers.

Do we need to switch roles?

Clearly, when working with non-native speakers, our normal collaborative approach of engaging the writer with talk about writing is not always effective, and the reason is not merely a language barrier. Powers, for example, has argued that “because collaborative techniques depend so heavily on shared basic assumptions or patterns, conferences that attempt merely to take the techniques we use with native-speaking writers and apply them to ESL writers may fail to assist the writer we intend to help (41).” We agree. We have found this practice to be both frustrating and unproductive.

While non-native speakers of English may genuinely need to work on
grammar and editing, we often interpret their concerns as a request for us to simply fix the paper rather than collaborate. Then, when we unconsciously move to a direct, teacher-like approach, we feel our role as a peer is threatened, and we encounter another problem. Even though engaging in more direct teaching may enable us, for the moment, to respond to what we perceive as the student’s request, Wang has shown us that some writers, especially Asians, perceive this shifting of the client to a student role as a cultural norm when working with a more experienced other. Unfortunately, however, such a shift may increase the distance between the peer consultant and the ESL writer and inhibit the creation of common rhetorical ground.

If switching roles doesn’t work, how about changing the topic?

According to Harris, Powers, Wang, and others, the difference between a native English speaker and a writer from a non-English speaking culture is primarily a difference in rhetorical patterns. The writing expectations of Americans often do not match the linguistic and cultural norms found in other cultures. This difference occurs in both what should be said in writing as well as in how to say it. Additionally, our expectations for a consulting experience may also differ from the non-native speakers’ experiences in one-to-one learning situations. Thus, non-native English speakers face an American academic metadiscourse and rhetoric that can be significantly different from that of their own language and culture.

Because of these factors, we often choose not to immediately take on the role of directive teaching with the non-native English speakers. Rather, we attempt to become a cultural informant by setting up the writing conference as a place where cultures and rhetoric can meet. A cultural informant offers suggestions about differences in rhetoric, explains the expectations of American audiences, and strives to maintain collaboration through discussion. A cul-
tural informant establishes a common ground through conversation devoted to discussion of the effect of culture on writing. While some directness may still be necessary for certain recurring grammar issues, the consultant who wants to maintain collaboration with the writer can focus on opening a cultural dialogue with the client. Talking about differences between the writer’s native language, culture and rhetoric and that of English may be the easiest way to make connections with the writer’s logic, purpose, and meaning.

To help writing consultants stay open to the effects of cultural variation on a writing conference, we have developed an approach called WATCH (see Figure One below). In order to use WATCH, however, we need to first look at the contrastive rhetoric that supports this approach, since an understanding of contrastive rhetoric can help a consultant make more informed decisions about how to best support a writer.

**Highlights of cultural variation and contrastive rhetoric: Invitations for cross-cultural communication**

Recent research into cultural variation in written communication points to dimensions of cultural variation in writing that a writing consultant may want to keep in mind when working with a non-native speaker of English. Following is a list of nine areas in which variation exists between cultures. For each item, we will identify the cultural variant, and then offer some consulting techniques that might be used to create a common ground based on that variant. It is important to stress, however, that these variants are not meant to imply iron-
Using the WATCH Approach

W-Talk about the WRITER.
Use “small talk” to find out where the student is from, how long s/he has been in the U.S., how s/he likes it, the extent of his/her first language writing experience, and opportunities to use English outside of the classroom (Fox 111).

A-Talk about the AUDIENCE/ASSIGNMENT.
Ask for a description of the assignment. Help interpret the professor’s comments and discuss his/her probable expectations. Check for understanding of the subject and reading comprehension in English.

T-Talk about the writer’s TEXT.
Ask the student to explain his/her purpose or the focus of the paper. Ask where s/he has informed the reader of his/her purpose. Confirm whether your interpretation of the text matches his/her intent in terms of voice as well as content.

C-A few COMMUNICATION CAVEATS.
Be more direct than when working with native speakers, but don’t silence the non-native speaker by dominating talk time and not genuinely listening. Do not always expect explicit verbal disagreement. Pay careful attention to non-verbal cues as well. Also, be aware that a student’s pause time may be longer than yours. If are not aware of this, you may have a tendency to silence and/or interrupt a student without realizing it.

H-Remember, HELPING the writer is your primary purpose.
Being WATCHful will help to establish the trust, respect, and empathy necessary for any “helping relationship” (Taylor 27). Creating a common ground by being WATCHful fosters better interpersonal relationships which, in turn, lower anxiety and increase productivity for both the ESL writer and the consultant.

Figure One
clad generalizations which apply to all ESL writers in every situation, since the extent of primary culture influence will vary across cultures, individuals, and rhetorical situations.

Cultural variant 1: Deductive and quasi-inductive topic development

One difference between American texts and texts produced in other cultures stems from the explicitness and the sequential logic of topic development. For example, Americans often prefer deductive topic development in academic writing, with the thesis at the beginning and the points of the paper very clearly laid out. In many Asian cultures, on the other hand, writers may prefer what John Hinds calls a quasi-inductive topic development; namely, they save the central argument for the end of the paper and rely on the reader to make connections and infer their thesis which may be indirectly stated. Therefore, the normal rhetorical pattern of a non-native speaker of English may be to save the main point of the paper for the end, but an American professor or fellow student might see this as poorly organized and logically flawed. Talking with the writer about differences in topic development across cultures is one way a writing consultant can function as a cultural informant for a non-native speaker of English (Connor; Hinds; Mosher).

Creating common ground: Topic development

Instead of assuming that the writer’s logic is flawed and trying to help the writer develop a thesis statement before reading the whole paper, invite the non-native speaker to read the whole paper first. Then try questioning the writer about the structure of the paper in one of these ways: Tutor Outlining: Outline the ideas in the paper as the student reads aloud; then, examine the outline with the student. Mapping: Set the paper aside and concentrate on mapping out ideas. If all else fails, and the paper does need some serious logical re-thinking, try Radical Deletion: Suggest to the writer that s/he use the
conclusion as the introduction and re-write the rest of the paper. Or try inver-
sion: Move the conclusion to the be-
inning and delete the original intro-
duction.

Cultural variant 2: Degree of explicit transition signaling

Between topics in a paper, Amer-
icans usually like to have a strong de-
gree of explicit transition signaling.
Without clear and relevant transitions, 
American readers often think the 
writer’s argument is weak or incoher-
ent. Again, in many other cultures, 
transitions are more reader dependent 
and the extra words are not included 
(Connor; Ferris; Mosher).

Creating common ground: Transition signaling

In order for the writer to make the 
paper more clear or to include more 
transitions, try Paragraph Labeling: 
Ask the student to write down the main 
idea of each paragraph in problematic 
sections and clarify how the para-
graphs relate to one another and to the 
overall theme or purpose of the paper. 
Lexical Ties: Show the student that En-
GLISH sentences generally state old dis-
course information in the subject posi-
tion and new information in the 
predicate position. Second sentences 
frequently either restate the new infor-
mation of the first sentence as old in-
formation in their subject position in a 
“tail-to-head” pattern, or refer back to 
the subject of the first sentence in a 
“head-to-head” pattern (Smith & 
Bernardt). An example of the more 
common tail-to-head pattern is, “John 
hopes to set a personal record. His personal best is still five seconds off 
the age group record.”

Cultural variant 3: Degree of directness and explicitness

When stating an argument, Amer-
icans often use a strong degree of di-
rectness and explicitness. Many pro-
fessors ask for a bold thesis such as 
“Slavery is the root of American rac-
ism today.” In some cultures, however, 
a strong opinion expressed to older
persons or persons of higher status, such as a professor, is disrespectful. Sometimes writers from such cultures write ambiguous statements with agentless passives, excessive disclaimers or vague pronoun references, such as, “Many people may think that today’s racism might be linked to America’s past use of slavery,” to avoid imposing their ideas on the reader, not knowing that American academics prefer greater directness and clarity (Hinkel, “Indirectness”). Perceived lack of clarity may also be due to what one Chinese student describes as a “concept gap.” This student says that “concept gaps” between sentences in Chinese are often larger, so American professors always ask her to write more sentences in English than she would need to write in Chinese (Severino 53).

Creating common ground: Directness

When a client’s paper seems ambiguous, try to understand what the client is really saying by questioning the student. Seek clarification: A consultant should question the student about the directness of the thesis; “what are you really trying to say here?” One strategy that a consultant could use is thesis identification where the consultant underlines what s/he thinks is the opening thesis, and then asks the client if s/he is correct. This will initiate a dialogue about the directness of the thesis statement. Also, discuss the use of active and passive verb constructions and how they affect meaning in a sentence (i.e., who is responsible for a given action, event, or opinion). “What did you mean, exactly, by this sentence?” “What were your reasons for using this quote here?” Or, try tutor restatements: Restate the points made by the student. Clarify with phrases such as, “So what you’re saying is. . . .” or ”As I understand it, you’re saying. . . .”

Cultural variant 4: Metaphoric usage

In some cultures, particularly East Asian cultures, words may be used in a
more evocative or metaphorical sense than Americans are used to. In these cultures, the reader is given more interpretive responsibility and expected to read more meaning into a single word (Carson; Young; Mosher). Americans, on the other hand, usually prefer fuller explanations. For example, Americans may use “theme” words throughout a paper, encasing them in quotation marks the first time they are used to imply a metaphorical usage of the word in the paper. Non-native English speakers need to know that an American academic audience may expect a metaphor either to be explained fully or implied by using quotations, italics, or underlining.

Creating common ground: Metaphoric usage

When the wording of a student from another culture seems awkward, rather than correct their usage or grammar, try to find out what the writer means. The consultant should look for theme words or words used in a highly evocative manner in a paper before determining if the cause is in fact an error in grammar, mechanics, or word usage. For example, a paper on education might have terms common to the field and in constant use marked with quotations. “At-risk,” “inclusion,” “educational technology,” and other words quoted like that imply a whole series of thoughts to someone in the educational field, but may only look like a punctuation error to someone in another field. Remember to question metaphors: Question the meaning of suspect words and their relationship to the rest of the paper. Students may have been using language in an audience-specific metaphorical or evocative sense that you may not understand if you are not a part of that audience. If this is the case, the consultant should encourage the student to make the implied meaning more explicit.

Cultural variant 5: Tolerance for digression

Americans have little tolerance for digression while in other cultures di-
gressions are often valued because they provide a broader, richer context for the main point. These digressions are seen as a way to expound upon knowledge and a chance for the writer to flex creative muscles. Americans usually save this type of writing for creative pieces outside of the classroom. Non-native speakers of English sometimes include digressions to get a point across that, in an American academic paper, would be explained more directly and in fewer words (Clyne; Leki). Of course, a writing consultant should be sure that an apparent digression is not a central argument in disguise.

Creating common ground: 
Digression

The lack of tolerance for digression in American academic writing can be illustrated for students in the following ways: Discuss the global focus of a paper by pointing out the ways the introduction and/or conclusion work within the paper. Topical analysis: Circle the subject of each independent clause in a problematic passage to illustrate the frequency of new topic introduction. Acting as a cultural informant, discuss how the digression may influence the writer’s audience.

Cultural variant 6: Argumentation and degree of support

Cultures differ in what is considered suitable and sufficient support for an author’s ideas. Americans value statistics, facts, personal experience, or documented occurrences. Other cultures may more highly value proverbs, metaphors, analogies, or examples and assertions which may require less support because the writer’s words are considered authority enough or because the writer expects the reader to infer the necessary support. Americans also tend to use more counter-arguments in anticipation of reader objections and tend to write longer more complex arguments (Connor; Ferris; Hinkel, “Pragmatic Interpretations”).
Creating common ground: Argumentation and support

Show the writer where s/he could expand in the paper by providing support. Ask who-questions to elicit support for unsupported statements. If necessary, ask if these details are important in the client’s culture, and if they are not, explain why they are important to an American audience.

Cultural variant 7: Voice/Stance

Many Americans prefer that the voice and stance of a paper be authoritative and authentic to the author, but this preference may be seen as offensive in some cultures, especially in Asian cultures where a strong voice could be seen as an affront to the reader (Harris; Hinkel, “Pragmatic Interpretations”). Students from such group-oriented cultures, for example, may find it extremely difficult to use “I” instead of “we” or active instead of passive sentences due to a deep-rooted sense of the collective self (Shen). Understandably, the new “voice” of a non-native speaker sometimes emerges slowly, as s/he adjusts to the American standard. As with all writers, we try to help non-native speakers retain as much of their own voice and style as possible while coping with the expectations of their new audience.

Creating common ground: Voice/Stance

Student restatements are sometimes useful in this area. Have the student put the paper aside and tell you what he or she is trying to say. Take written notes of key phrases and words the writer uses while talking, and then explain how you interpret these phases as a cultural informant. If the retelling includes more of the student’s own voice, suggest that s/he include some of that material in the paper.

Cultural variant 8: Process vs. product view of writing

While our writing center pedagogy encourages us to focus on writing as a process, in other cultures, students may have no experience writing multiple
drafts, and the one-draft essay may be considered an art (Severino). Readers, in turn, may place more value than we do on this fresh stage of writing. If that is the case, a writer may be rather uncomfortable with our talk and practice of multiple draft writing.

Creating common ground: Process vs. product
Questions about the number of drafts a student usually does or the use of writing groups or writing consultants in the student’s home country could lead to revelations about the writer’s perceptions of writing as process. Other approaches include the following: Selected focus: Concentrate on one section of the paper (e.g., the introduction) and put the rest aside. Role reversal: Ask the student to listen to you as you read the paper aloud. Ask him or her to be the consultant and give you advice on what to do with the paper.

Cultural variant 9: Ownership of intellectual property and plagiarism
Americans have a high degree of ownership of intellectual property and plagiarism is not tolerated; in some cultures, the prohibition against unattributed use of others’ ideas is not as stringent and may even be seen as a way of honoring the author (Leki, Young). For some non-native speakers of English, a discussion of these issues may be necessary.

Creating common ground: intellectual property
Consultants should act as a cultural informant when talking about the seriousness of plagiarism. Many universities have strict policies about the use of another’s idea as one’s own, and ESL writers may have never encountered the idea of plagiarism before. A quick peek at a university student handbook or English department rule book should be enough to introduce the student to the idea that American academia doesn’t take well to plagiarism. To assist with avoiding plagiarism, some instruction in paraphrasing might be useful. Often
non-native English speakers think they have to change every word. Student re-statements could also be helpful. Ask the student to restate hard to understand text in his or her own words. Write down exactly what the student says and compare it with the original text. Explaining the principles and details of citation conventions may also be necessary, such as telling the student that any unattributed use of an author’s ideas and not just his or her words is considered to be plagiarism.

WATCHing for cross-cultural variations in writing conferences

In order to facilitate implementation of these strategies, we have designed a system called WATCH to facilitate a cultural dialogue with ESL writers. This system focuses on the Writer, the Audience and Assignment, the Text, Communication, and reminds us that our primary goal is to Help the client. General considerations for implementing WATCH include the following three guidelines adapted from Harris. First, look for rhetorical patterns or preferences that conflict with American expectations. Identify differences in topic development, coherence strategies argumentation, and logic. Second, look for hidden assumptions about writing and audience, etc. Try to determine the writer’s reasons for writing as she or he does. Only when assumptions are uncovered, can we begin to understand whether cross-cultural differences are affecting the student’s writing. Third, look for ethnocentric biases in your own judgments of non-native speakers. Don’t assume that the absence of expected writing conventions equals poor writing. Question your own assumptions about good writing before making negative judgments.

When working with non-native speakers, remember that these writers must ultimately choose their own style of writing. Some non-native speakers may prefer to retain their own cultural style of writing as much as possible. Whatever their decision, WATCHing for cross-cultural variation is intended to help the writing consultant become a
cross-cultural informant so that the non-native English speaking writer can make pragmatic and rhetorically sound decisions. Finally, we like to suggest that the WATCH approach is highly compatible with a research agenda like Carol Severino’s study of ESL students’ home country literacy instruction and writing experiences through structured writing assignments and interviews. As Severino suggests, these interviews can be taped and transcribed for use in writing tutor training programs. WATCH, we believe, would be best applied by writing consultants as one component of such a larger ESL research and training program.

New goals for working with non-native speakers of English

Learning a new language is a difficult task. Writing in that new language is especially challenging because when we ask non-native speakers of English to write in English, we are also asking those students to come to terms with the rhetorical conventions and values of a new culture. As writing consultants, we struggle to maintain our roles as both peers and cultural informants in a complex situation. As Leki has pointed out, “Clearly, when dealing with students whose language we do not share, we must remember how strong the link is between identity and language and remain sensitive to the difficult and sometimes painful juggling acts we may innocently be asking our students to perform (104).” And, may we add, those acts we ask of ourselves.

David Mosher Davin Granroth, and Troy Hicks
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI

Works Cited
Brooks, Jeff. “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work.” Writing Lab Newsletter 15.6 (February 1991): 1-4.


