



Becoming an Ally: Tutoring Multilingual Writers

Discussion Guide

[Becoming an Ally: Tutoring Multilingual Writers](#) is a series of short training films for writing center tutors created by Ohio University's Student Writing Center and Graduate Writing & Research Center in Athens, Ohio. As we examined our work with multilingual writers, we realized that allyship is the underlying goal of our tutoring practice. We want to come alongside writers, draw on their strengths, and then teach and support them as they work towards their goals.

But what does it actually mean to be an ally? It can be difficult work and there are certainly times when we make mistakes. In these scenes we explore ways of being an ally for multilingual writers and some of the challenges that we face in that work. We examine assumptions that tutors and writers may bring to the tutoring session and strategies for working through them. We struggle to avoid appropriating writers' texts and we also explore the ways that speaking in home languages can benefit the writers we work with. And, while our focus here is on becoming allies for multilingual writers, many of the issues that these scenes highlight apply to a variety of student populations.

Please note that these scenes feature real tutors from our writing centers working with real writers on their real texts; however, the tutors and writers are all acting. We worked carefully with our writers to identify past writing projects that could help us highlight important issues and challenges.

Credits

Tutor Actors	Don Dudding Sage Foote David Johnson Farzaneh Vahabi Yi-Ting Wang
Writer Actors	Elizarni Pin-Huei Huang Niko (Quanfu) Liu Jinyi Liu Josephine Mwangi
Narrator	Samuel Stinson
Makeup	Erica Lange
Graphic Design	Andrea Swart
Collaborators	David Johnson Becca Lachman
Creators	Talinn Phillips Rachael Ryerson Candace Stewart
Production	Carrie Love Matt Love
Sponsors	University College Elizabeth Sayrs, Dean Graduate College Joseph Shields, Dean

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Discussion Guide

By Talinn Phillips, PhD and Rachael Ryerson, PhD

This discussion guide provides questions for each scene in [Becoming an Ally: Tutoring Multilingual Writers](#). You can respond to them individually, in small groups, or as a whole tutoring staff. The questions could be used in a traditional discussion or as part of a personal tutoring journal or other professional development. The questions focus on key themes in each scene, asking viewers to analyze the session and also to consider how they would respond in a similar situation.

Scene 1: Struggling to be an Ally as a Multilingual Tutor

1. Pin-Huei is reluctant to accept Farzaneh's advice because she is "not an American." What does Farzaneh do to win her over?
2. How do you understand Pin-Huei's assignment? What was she being asked to do?
3. If you are a multilingual tutor, what strategies have you used to respond to writers like Pin-Huei who are resistant to your expertise and knowledge as a tutor?
4. When you are tutoring, do you, like Farzaneh, read the client's text silently or aloud? What are the advantages or disadvantages to reading out loud or silently?
5. At ~4:00, Farzaneh describes the first problem in the text and Pin-Huei tries to clarify her understanding of that problem. What do you understand the problem to be? How would you have explained this to a writer?
6. Later in the scene (~7:00), Pin-Huei again quietly challenges one of Farzaneh's suggestions by using her professor's instructions as an authority. In this instance, Farzaneh was able to agree with the professor's ideas and build upon them. How could Farzaneh have framed a response to the professor's ideas if she had disagreed with the professor's advice?
7. How does Pin-Huei maintain control over her own paper, and how does Farzaneh help Pin-Huei maintain that control?

Scene 2: Moving from Assumptions to Allyship

1. Elizarni, a Muslim woman, challenges a number of Don's assumptions, both through her person and her research. What are some of those assumptions?
2. How does Don respond to Eli when he realizes that his assumptions were incorrect?
3. What is Eli's dissertation project? How does Don go about developing an understanding of it?
4. By the end of the scene, Don is actively working to become Eli's ally. How does he do this?
5. What advice does Don give in his reflection for those challenging moments when a writer upends your assumptions?
6. In her own reflection, Eli identifies some of the other assumptions that Americans have had about her during her time in the U.S. What are some of those stereotypes? How has she worked to combat them?
7. How have multilingual writers challenged your own assumptions? How did you respond?

Scene 3: Allyship at the Sentence Level

1. When the tutor, Sage, sets the agenda with Niko, he says that he really wants to work on grammar. What are some possible reasons why Niko asks for grammar help?
2. Niko identifies grammar help as one of his main goals for the session. What do they actually work on in the session though? Is it only grammar, or is there something else going on here? Identify some examples to support your claims.
3. When tutoring, how do you proceed if a writer isn't able to provide an assignment sheet or instructions for the writing project? How does Sage navigate Niko's missing assignment sheet?
4. In this session, Sage allows Niko to read a passage and then they stop as Sage discusses what she noticed. Do you use a similar method when working with multilingual writers or do you prefer to address a problem as soon as you notice it? What's your rationale for your method?
5. After Sage makes a suggestion, she works to clarify with Niko, making sure that her suggestion doesn't change his meaning and that he understands that suggestion. Why is this clarifying move important? What are some other methods of clarifying a writer's intended meaning?
6. There are moments in this scene when Sage corrects some of Niko's mistakes. What is your writing center's policy on correcting errors for writers? What's the rationale for that policy?

7. Notice how often Sage asks Niko questions about his text. What does Niko gain as a writer and what does Sage gain as a tutor through this question/response method?
8. If Niko had asked for help with his grammar and Sage had refused to provide any, how might Niko have responded?
9. In her reflection, Sage shares about her decision-making process when working with writers on sentence-level issues. What is her process? What is your own?

Scene 4: Allyship Without Appropriation

1. Early in the scene, Yi-Ting gently works to convince Jinyi that she needs to open the chapter in a way that will meet an American academic audience's expectations—by providing an overview of the chapter, etc. How does Jinyi respond to these suggestions?
2. At ~7:05, Yi-Ting suggests that there may not be an argument in Jinyi's paper because she was unknowingly employing a Chinese rhetorical convention in her paper. How does Yi-Ting frame this critique? How would you have made this suggestion to Jinyi?
3. At ~9:15, Yi-Ting begins speaking in Chinese. What is she trying to accomplish by using Chinese instead of English? What is the effect? If you spoke Jinyi's home language, would you have switched to Chinese here? Why or why not?
4. How does Yi-Ting affirm Jinyi's disciplinary knowledge during this session?
5. After suggesting the need for more explicit framing, Yi-Ting suggests two different conceptual frames for Jinyi's material:

modernity and cosmopolitanism. How does Yi-Ting try to move Jinyi towards the ideas of modernity and then cosmopolitanism as ways of framing her discussion?

6. This session ends without a great deal of resolution. Jinyi's chapter still doesn't use the kind of framing expected by an American academic audience. What does get accomplished in this session though? How do you handle a lack of "answers" or resolution in a session?
7. Think about how the concept of appropriation functions in this session. Are Yi-Ting's suggestions appropriate? Why or why not? Does your opinion change at all after you watch Yi-Ting's reflection on the session?
8. In the reflection, what do Yi-Ting and Jinyi say that they've learned by working together?

Scene 5: Allyship Through Home Languages

1. Yi-Ting and Jinyi speak in Mandarin for part of their sessions. Looking back across both scenes and their reflections, in what different ways do they employ Mandarin? Is this work appropriate for a tutoring session?
2. Beginning around 9:40, Yi-Ting begins explicitly teaching Jinyi about the principles of a good translation. What are those principles?
3. Although Yi-Ting is a professional translator, this session is not nearly so simple as Jinyi passing a list of items to Yi-Ting and waiting to receive the translations. How do they collaborate to

translate portions of this text? (Hint: Listen to Jinyi's reflection to get a clearer sense of this.)

4. Whether you are multilingual or monolingual tutor, sometimes writers ask us for help translating important phrases or concepts from other languages. How can you apply these principles of translation to your own tutoring? Where would you start and what would be your ultimate goal? (Think about the difference between the connotations of "pond" and "swamp." Why does the translation matter?)
5. What are some other benefits or uses for working in a writer's home language? If your writing center permits tutoring in home languages, how have you seen it used?
6. In her reflection, Jinyi talks in detail about why these translations are important to her thesis and the different ways that she benefited by working with Yi-Ting. What benefits does she identify?
7. In Yi-Ting's reflection, she describes different scenarios in which she works with writers in Mandarin. Does she identify additional situations beyond the ones in these scenes? What rationales does she give?
8. The end of Yi-Ting's reflection also highlights ways that tutors collaborate with each other as they're collaborating with the writer. Yi-Ting's knowledge of Mandarin and of best practices in translation offers writers specific benefits, but she recognizes that writers can benefit from other tutors' expertise as well. What different kinds of expertise do your fellow tutors have? Are there ways that you could collaborate more effectively and intentionally than you do now?

Scene 6: Allyship with Writers of Global Englishes

1. In this scene, David gently challenges Josephine's use of the word "graft" and she is visibly upset by this. Our script then literally read: "Josephine responds," allowing for multiple possibilities. How does Josephine respond to David's challenge? How might other writers have responded when their linguistic knowledge was questioned?
2. Josephine made an explicit rhetorical move to vary her vocabulary by using "graft" as a synonym for "corruption." In this case, Josephine chooses an appropriate synonym, but it's one her readers may not be familiar with. Writers sometimes use this strategy less successfully though, choosing a synonym that is problematic. Why are some synonyms problematic and how do you address this with writers?
3. At one point Josephine expresses her frustration, saying, "I know that I'm here to learn from you, but I don't understand this" and there are several moments when she asks, "Can I keep it?" How does David respond to these questions? What language does he use to express his concern about Josephine's word choice or phrasing while still affirming Josephine's linguistic proficiency?
4. Josephine exercises a lot of agency in questioning David's recommendations. How does she advocate for herself and her global English, both in the use of "graft" and with the "small fish...big fish" phrase later in the scene? What strategies can you use to minimize the chance that you're appropriating a writer's language?
5. In her paper, Josephine argues that "African [writers] have to esteem the African language as it is part of their culture." Her paper is advocating for the value and necessity of the very

language that is challenged in this session. Near the end, David realizes the underlying linguistic imperialism in some moments of the session and asks Josephine if she felt colonized by his responses to her writing. The writing center holds substantial colonizing power, so how does your writing center work to avoid colonizing the writers you work with?

6. In her reflection, Josephine observes that a student like her, who is familiar with the tutoring process and knows her tutor, might

feel comfortable challenging the linguistic imperialism embedded in this scene. Writers who are new to the writing center or the university or who are less confident might not. How can you work to affirm a writer's linguistic abilities in your tutoring sessions?

7. In what ways does this session impact your sense of what constitutes correct, acceptable uses of American English?

Notes

Final Thoughts

We've used these scenes to illustrate some key principles behind our own work to be allies of multilingual writers. First, allies start where the writer is. Sage may not be happy to hear that Niko wants to work on grammar. She may be concerned about giving him too much help or even afraid that she won't know the answers to his questions, but she doesn't try to pretend that grammar doesn't matter and she doesn't ignore his request. Farzaneh may well be hurt or offended when a writer disregards her expertise, but she works to establish a rapport anyway.

Allies recognize writers' strengths and abilities. Yi-Ting knows that she isn't a part of the field of Art History and she's careful to defer to Jinyi's disciplinary expertise. David doesn't ridicule Josephine's linguistic choices. He doesn't tell her that she's made a mistake, but affirms her linguistic knowledge while also raising her awareness of significant rhetorical differences between Kenyan and American varieties of English. Don recognizes what an important contribution Elizarni's research makes and he praises her for it, jumping on board to help her with her project in any way he can.

But allies also don't ignore problems. As careful as these tutors are to build relationships with these writers and to affirm their work and show excitement about their projects, the tutors also deliver the bad news when they have to.

Furthermore, allies bring all of their expertise to the table when a writer asks for help. Yi-Ting isn't afraid to draw on her experience as a translator, even though that's not a traditional area of writing center work. Sage uses her knowledge of grammar effectively to help Niko improve his own. David draws on both his knowledge of postcolonial theory and his knowledge of language politics in his

session with Josephine. Allies don't try to "hold something back" that's not a regular part of our work if a writer would benefit.

But allies also don't appropriate writers' papers, either with their own ideas or by forcing them to meet U.S. cultural expectations. David keeps reminding Josephine that the choice is hers, while trying to make her aware of how a U.S. audience might respond. Yi-Ting does the same when working with Jinyi on her thesis. Don avoids appropriation as well by taking the time to get to know Elizarni and her project instead of charging in with assumptions about what her project is, while Farzaneh makes sure to respond carefully to Pin-Huei's concerns and to the comments from Pin-Huei's professor. Sage is careful to teach Niko how to correct some of his own mistakes and to make sure she understands what Niko wants to say instead of just making a bunch of corrections for him.

In that same vein, allies honor the concerns that writers bring to the session. No one tries to convince Pin-Huei that she shouldn't follow her professor's advice, or Niko that he should really be giving all of his attention to genre, or Jinyi that those translations aren't really important. If we try to overrule the writer's agenda with our own, we aren't really being allies to the writers we work with.

We've tried to highlight a range of ways to be an ally in these scenes, along with the challenges that we face. But there are many more stories we could have told. We hope this film encourages you to examine your own work with multilingual writers in a new light and that it will spark many more conversations about how to be an ally for multilingual writers and for other writers you serve.