*Kuan-Chun Chen is from Taiwan and holds a B.A. in English from National Chengchi University, Taiwan. His award-winning linguistic project in 2017 addresses the issue of endangered local languages and the predicament of language policy in Taiwan. In 2018, he took a position as a tutor at the Research and Writing Center at the University of Tübingen in Germany. Becoming an English writing tutor is one of the most unexpected surprises in his life. He is currently working on his M.A. in English Literatures and Cultures in Tübingen, with a focus on postcolonial studies and Global South Studies. His Master's thesis deals with Chinese-Australian literature, the Yellow Peril narrative, and multiculturalism. He will be studying at the University of Cambridge as an EU ERASMUS exchange student and will read postcolonial and moral theories. In the ensuing text, Chen reflects upon the initial challenges he faced as a second language communicator upon arrival in the US, and then chronicles the transition from tribulation to understanding and success through his own process of becoming a tutor. Drawing on his own experience as a tutee in a new country, Chen notes how his own initially tenuous writing experiences later allowed him to see that it was through his "tutees' vulnerability" that he saw "their potential, courage, and strength."*



## The Tenderest Revenge: From a Tutee to a Tutor

By Kuan-Chun Chen

I used to think that I was a terrible writer, and I still do sometimes. I also believed that going to the writing center would help me become a better writer, but my first experience there was a nightmare.

Six years ago, I was still an undergraduate student who had never been on a plane until I successfully secured a place in a one-year exchange program with a partial scholarship in Washington D.C. I still vividly remember the moment when I stepped out of the airport shuttle I

shared with some other passengers, one of whom being a German woman, who carefully protected her diploma in her luggage lest the reckless driver break the frame of it. The air in Washington D.C. smelled and felt different—the humidity was different; the smell of trees was different; the shapes of the clouds were different; even the sun seemed new. "This is probably what many international students meant in online forums by *the air of freedom*," I thought to myself. After all, I have just landed in the land of the free.

But what does the air of freedom imply? The person with the utmost freedom is probably a baby because it does not know any rules or laws. Not aware of and bound by any restriction imposed by the outer world, it is completely innocent. The air of freedom, hence, suggests a peculiar kind of innocence, and I would not have been *truly* innocent, like a newborn baby, if I had known I was innocent. This innocence is not only the lack of life experience but also, as I would soon discover, the inexperience in English academic writing. An English major from a non-Anglo-Saxon cultural background, I had learned the concept of a thesis statement in English academic writing seminars, but I was often unable to formulate one either because I was more used to presenting my reasoning before I came to a definite conclusion/argument (this seems to come from a different rhetoric tradition) or because I simply lacked enough conceptual knowledge and a solid basis in the field. This difficulty to form clear and effective thesis statements soon became a pressing crisis because in addition to introductory German and one anthropological seminar about sex and gender, I enrolled in two literature courses. One was about Shakespeare, in which we read seven plays in one semester; the other was about African literature, in which we read some eight novels. The writing assignments, lurking pop quiz monsters, mid-term and final exams, and class participation in addition to the amount of reading were overwhelming, especially for a non-native speaker like me. For this reason, I plucked up enough courage to make an appointment at the

writing center, hoping that someone could guide me through the dreadful essay assignments in the Shakespeare course.

The appointment was not what I had expected or imagined I thought the tutor would be interested in, or at least would pretend to be keen to help me because I was one of the few international students who had challenged themselves by taking literature classes in an all-English environment. Unfortunately, unlike the friendly and inclusive atmosphere the writing center website tried to advertise, I was greeted by an ill-tempered tutor, who seemed rather unwilling to answer my questions but very willing to tap the pen every few seconds throughout the session. Timid as I was, I made sure to ask the most important questions: "How exactly should I construct a thesis statement? How should a thesis statement look?" I meant, I knew that a thesis statement is the main argument of an essay or a paper and should be supported by evidence in each body paragraph. I also knew that a thesis statement often appears at the end of the introduction but knowing the definition of it does not necessarily equal knowing how to formulate one. I thought this would have been a common problem for many, and I thought the tutor should have shown more lenience to an innocent and insecure international student.

This was when I realized that being innocent, or ignorant of knowledge yet to be acquired, does not always guarantee kindness from others, but in such a pedagogical environment, I was rather shocked by how the tutor responded to my questions. Instead of giving a positive response, a warm smile (even a fake one would have sufficed), or the slightest hint of how to structure a thesis statement, the tutor darted some unanticipated coldness at me, as if I had done something unforgivable and unfathomable. I forgot what precisely the tutor said (maybe my Freudian defense mechanism forced me not to remember those words), but the impression I still have in my mind was that the tutor refused to reveal any information about academic writing, leaving me even more

insecure and puzzled. The tutor questioned me relentlessly with unblinking eyes, without showing any trace of sympathy and understanding. Whenever I said, "I don't know", the puckered mouth, frowning eyebrows, more tapping of the pen, and most importantly, the indifferent tone revealed nothing but impatience and irritation; it seemed that my questions and innocence were too much of a burden. After a few attempts, I no longer felt entitled to admit my nescience, i.e., to answer the tutor's questions with the three-word curse *I don't know* that would potentially intensify the already nervous condition. I figured those American students simply knew more than I did and maybe I was too incompetent to study in the U.S. "Obviously, I have overestimated myself and should have never come here for this exchange program," I thought to myself.

That forty-five-minute tutoring session felt like a never-ending torture. I felt involved in a university-promoted academic scam as I sat there speechless, not because I did not want to say anything and not because I wanted to be *passive aggressive*, a concept I first encountered in the U.S., but because I really did not have the answer the tutor wanted. It seemed as if the tutor was ready to deport me because of my dissatisfactory English proficiency. The tutor's interrogation, however fierce and harsh, was in vain because I was clearly innocent. "Congratulations, you are allowed to stay in this country," I guessed this was the main message the Judiciary Writing Center announced as the tutoring session came to a painful end. Temporary relief after the tutorial was followed by more destructive self-questioning.

"I thought I could write in English," I thought to myself, "but apparently I was wrong. I cannot even speak the language. It is after all a foreign language and not my language." I had always been very fond of English because I was good at it at school—that is why I decided to study English literature and linguistics at my home university in Taipei, but this frustration accompanied by the tutor's callousness was unbearable and devastating. Despite the countless

hours I invested in English learning, despite surviving the frustration of a child without answers to so many questions about English (the Internet was not common back then), despite all the audio recording homework I did in my childhood, despite all the early mornings or late nights in which I had to listen to English radio programs, despite reviewing all the vocabulary flashcards assiduously on school buses in my teenage years, despite the English speech contests I entered, despite all the standardized English tests I have taken and passed, despite the confidence I built from academic successes, as a non-native speaker of English, I was more vulnerable to language-induced anxiety than I had expected. Despite all my effort, I failed in front of the tutor. It was epic. In front of this Anglo-Saxon beast led and fed by the complicit tutor, I could only feel devoured by the English academic tradition.

This first experience at the writing center was traumatic, but I thought perhaps I was merely unlucky and still believed in educators' noble intent to help students. I made another appointment with a different tutor, but I cannot recall much detail about that session. As far as I can still recall, the second tutor was much friendlier, less grumpy, and more helpful, although I was not entirely sure whether the objectives of the session were achieved. It was at least *polite and harmless*, but afterwards I was not confident enough to make any more appointments, or maybe I was slightly disappointed by the lack of a discernable outcome. I managed to submit the essay, but I was certainly not impressed by what I had written and did not know whether my essay contained a thesis statement. Especially after the first contact with the writing center, my thought was that reaching out to professors during their office hours was probably more efficient and meaningful than being bombarded by the 'thesis statement questions' I had been troubling myself with and yet not being provided with any clues or support. I was lucky enough to have had supportive professors who guided me through that bumpy first semester, and this surely involved some inevitable

discomfort of growth, such as crying at the professors' offices or collapsing in my apartment alone at night.

My hard work, however, still paid off, as my grades for the essay assignments or written exams were not nearly as bad as I had imagined. In the second semester, I decided to continue reading seven more Shakespearean plays with the same professor; my essays received the highest score in the Shakespeare seminar's midterm and final exams. Even today, I still cannot understand how I got such good grades. Was the professor being more forgiving to cheer me up? Was I enjoying the affirmation bonus for international students? Maybe the answers to these questions did not matter. What mattered in those writing assignments and exams, according to the professor, was not only the language but also the ideas. I had original ideas, and they wouldn't have been as original if I had not grown up in a non-English speaking country—my native language and cultural background were after all a blessing in disguise. Affirmation from the professor was encouraging, but I was convinced that my achievement had little, or rather nothing, to do with the two visits to the writing center. Undeterred by the miserable experience at the writing center after returning to Taiwan from Washington D.C., I continued my bachelor's degree, read more literary works and articles in English, and tried to improve my writing by trial and error. Although I became better at forming and presenting my thesis statements, I was never sure whether I could answer the thesis statement questions confidently or whether I had entirely dispelled the nightmare at the writing center.

In the two post-D.C. years at my home university, I often thought secretly to myself, if I were to become a tutor (this seemed very unlikely back then because of my self-perceived inadequacy), I would want to become one who never evokes this amount of insecurity in the tutees' mind in such a short appointment. Instead, I would want my tutees to thrive and feel more confident

about themselves after each tutoring session, even if they know they still have much to learn and to improve upon. It is not about praising the tutees with excessive compliments, but about not failing them with outright impatience and unfriendliness. I want to provide them with a safe space where they can express their concerns and doubts. I want to give them a chance to hold the pen in their own hands and write down their ideas freely without feeling judged or blamed. I want to create a place where they can articulate and work through their thoughts aloud and construct their thesis statements without being left alone and helpless. I want to be a mirror that helps them see and understand themselves more clearly.

To my surprise, this came true a couple of years later when I landed in Germany thanks to another scholarship. Eager to find a part-time job during my master's degree, I stumbled upon a job posting on campus, submitted the application, had an interview with the writing center team, and fortunately became a peer tutor in English academic writing. Getting this job is proof of my perseverance and improvement. At least I believed so.

In retrospect, as a trained writing tutor with two years of tutoring experience, I realized at some point that the two tutors in Washington D.C., especially the first one, were trying to stick strictly to the non-directive approach to push boundaries. As innocent as I was six years ago, I of course did not know anything about directive and non-directive tutoring. Unfortunately, that hidden non-directive agenda only made me feel inadequate and stupid. Sticking to a non-directive approach should not involve impatience, contempt, or the evocation of the tutees' fear or discomfort, and I made sure to avoid this in all my tutorials. If the tutees were nervous or anxious, I would try first to calm them down and take care of their feelings before moving on to the academic discussion. Initially, as a new tutor who was frequently faced with questions to which I had no answers, I had to learn how to work not only with my own uncertainty but also with tutees'

insecurity. Seeing the tutees' struggle is always like seeing my own, especially when I am now working in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing center, mostly with German speakers. They have different struggles than mine, but I could relate to that frustration and fear of failure. For me, writing centers are not only about building academic competence and strength but also about dealing with vulnerability.

Since writing is often thought to be a personal activity and words can be deemed an extension of the self, the tutees are in an extremely vulnerable position once they step into the writing center, entrusting the tutors with utmost vulnerability. Being tutored is about being seen, heard, and responded to. Not being able to cope with the tutees' vulnerability and to empower them, from my perspective and experience, is not effective tutoring. If the tutees require additional linguistic devices other than English, I sometimes talked to them in German and encouraged them to express their ideas in whichever language they are more comfortable with. Talking in German is a gesture that suggests my occasional uncertainty with the German language, an invitation to work with vulnerability, and a proposal to thrive together in a tutor-tutee relationship. The myth is that we should always act confident and strong, including in the tutoring sessions, but the fact is, even we tutors are not always strong, nor are the tutees. To build strength, we must deal with vulnerability first. I can still remember vividly the apprehensive Turkish tutee who had to take care of their children while studying, the Iranian scientist who decided to do a degree in Germany, my Chinese classmate who struggled with term papers and had the same thesis statement problems as mine, the two German tutees who failed in their first essay assignment at the university but came back confidently to say 'thank you' a few months later, and many more other tutees. It was in their vulnerability that I saw their potential, courage, and strength.

I used to think that I was a terrible writer, and I still am sometimes, but now I am sitting here, writing, and editing twenty learning modules on academic writing for the university. My tutor job eventually led me to another student assistant position in a university-led project, in which I graded around one hundred student essays, identified some common mistakes, and drafted twenty learning modules to assist future students. I will not study here forever, but these learning modules are a special way to nurture future generations and will continue guiding confused students, as the modules will soon become part of the university's online resources. I have thrived in the writing center, and my tutees are my best tutors. Producing these learning modules is much more than a part-time job for me; it is a way to give my invisible support to struggling students outside the writing center I will soon be leaving, but I refuse to take vengeance now on the tutor six years ago by venting my spleen on tutees. I regard my tutoring sessions and these learning modules as the tenderest revenge.