TUTORING STRATEGIES FOR CLIENTS DEVELOPING WRITTEN FLUENCY IN ENGLISH

When working with clients who are developing fluency in English, the following ideas regarding Ownership, Local Issues, Comprehension, and Resources may help.

1. Ownership

Build Confidence
Consider the expression "kill your darlings." Now think about how it feels when you have to cut out or choose new words: Are you annoyed? Tired? Interested? Clients developing fluency work hard as writers; they may consider every hard-won sentence a "darling" because they rely on words and constructions they know well. Conversely, they may not care very much about what they write because they do not trust themselves to write correctly in a sophisticated tone. Ultimately, the degree of ownership they feel affects their ability to brainstorm, revise, and stay motivated.

Thus, they can benefit from your subtle affirmation of their words, which counts as validation of their ideas. If you give them this ownership while showing them how to revise and improve, they will be more invested, which will help them develop a more authoritative tone. Try these:

- Repeat what they say or write with minimal edits. Use their words, sentence constructions, and logical flow whenever possible. When you introduce new language, rearrange their ideas, or add phrasing for effect, they 1) may feel everything they wrote was wrong, or 2) may become confused at all the new vocabulary and grammar you have suggested.
- Practice becoming "meta" by giving them writing terminology. In other words, label types of language (e.g., formal, vague, etc.), consistent sentence patterns (e.g., simple, complex), and typical structural needs (e.g., shorter introductory phrases). Name the sentences in a paper (e.g., opening sentence, analysis statement, context for evidence, etc.). Review parts of speech and lists of transitions or conjunctions; develop a list of words to be avoided (e.g., "important," "good," "bad," etc.).
- Label the work you do together, too: Ok, we just finished *listing details*; now let's look for *connections*. Or: Since you already have two *analysis* statements explaining the evidence, let's draft a *concluding sentence* that hints at the connection between this idea and your next paragraph.
- After talk-writing, underline, circle, or box their key words or ideas. Then, use those to draft a sentence or part of a sentence. If you add a verb or conjunction to their existing words and have them finish or add to the sentence, they witness their language as the base and learn a correct grammar construction. Consider templates for the analysis statement readers expect after a piece of evidence: 1) Because [paraphrase of quote], X; 2) By [description of what the author/researcher does], X; 3) This/Such

"[quote one word or phrase from evidence],"
means/suggests/explains/implies X; 4) This [label the evidence as a
question/fact/nuance/counterpoint/etc.] does Y.

- Model your thinking through narrating: I asked that because [I was not sure
  of your opinion based on the way this sentence is worded], This stands out to
  me because [it implied you think the author did not include something], If we
  [list each author's stance], I think you [will be able to find similarities and
  differences more easily], and I like this word especially because [it is a
  strong, active verb]. All of these sentences emphasize their words as part of a
  thinking process. You are not judging—you are validating their language by
  using and developing their ideas.

EXAMPLE: Holly struggled to expand her ideas; she consistently received comments
like: "good argument but no in-depth analysis." We began identifying places analysis
should always be, and then we began using her original words as points of
departure for expansion. If she wrote "important" or repeated the same phrase
three times in a paragraph, we would explain what made it important or why it
needed to be repeated. We used vocabulary resources to select more formal,
nuanced synonyms and drafted sentence stems and templates that forced analysis
using these new words.

2. Local Issues

Strategy Variation
Our go-to strategy is ideas first, grammar second. However, when clients are
developing fluency, you may need to clarify grammar and word choice in order to
understand their ideas. This local work could occur earlier than you are used to, i.e.,
when brainstorming or outlining. For example, taking a moment to look up the
definitions of "religious," "sacred," "spiritual," and "transcendent" may be the best
way to help them focus their pre-writing work.

Working from local to global and back to local is not a waste of time. Drafting clear
summary and claim statements in a session gives the client solid building blocks to
use independently. Starting with a clear, correctly expressed idea also allows you to
ask more appropriate, efficient questions for brainstorming and argument
development. In other words, if you press hard for ideas without checking the initial
articulation, you may miss something they are trying to say.

Prioritize Grammar Concerns
You may feel overwhelmed by the number or nature of grammar mistakes and/or
unconventional stylistic choices. By focusing on key sentences (thesis, transitions,
analysis, and concluding thoughts), you can limit the scope of your work.

You can also select the top two most consistent sentence-level errors and let
everything else go. First, find and fix an example together, then point out one for
them to attempt fixing, and, finally, ask them to find an example and suggest a

correction. It does not matter if they "pass this test"; the discussions you have about three sentences with the same issue are what matter. Know, too, that grammar knowledge is usually not achieved in a straight line of improvement. As clients learn new skills or write about new complex ideas, their brains naturally let some past grammar lessons go before everything comes together at a later stage.

<u>Acknowledge Clients' Goals</u>
Sometimes clients think grammar is the most significant problem with their writing. You may have grave concerns about their overall argument, but feel pressured by them to edit every sentence. When this happens, consider trying the following:

- Buy yourself time by suggesting you review the entire piece of writing independently; then, find the main argument problems and say the grammar and word choice especially need to be fixed in the thesis or transitions. As you begin "editing" the sentence, a re-evaluation of their argument should naturally occur.
- Say, "Yes, grammar is important and we will fix it, but it gets less points than argument/logic/etc., so, as your tutor, I'd like to double check the argument before we fix grammar."
- Agree to edit the introduction or conclusion; after three or four sentences, interrupt and say, "Now this paragraph is off to a great start grammatically, but, as a reader, I'm wondering about [argument-based issue]." Then sum-up any grammar lessons learned and turn to the global logic development issue.
- Use any possible professor feedback to support your efforts to focus more on argument than editing.

Remember: no one wants *all* of his or her grammar mistakes pointed out all at once! It is demoralizing. If every sentence has four or more problems and you only have time to fix two, remind yourself this is progress. Teaching them how to address two consistent patterns empowers them to improve over time.

EXAMPLE: Jessica had many grammar issues. Maybe 15% of her sentences were correct. For the first few sessions, we focused on parallel construction and subordinating clauses, often working on transition or analysis sentences. We did not fix every single mistake in these sentences—we just made the word forms and phrases consistent. Over two to three sessions, once she began recognizing when and how to edit for structural consistency, we then focused on verb tenses for a couple of sessions. We then moved to prepositions. In this way, we checked argument and started with the broadest, most basic sentence-level issue at the same time.

3. Comprehension

<u>Strategy Variation</u>
We always try to check a client's understanding in writing, but we often accept verbal verifications from fluent speakers. When working with clients developing fluency, it is best to encourage proof in writing as often as possible. This way, they have a chance to process information in your helpful presence and feel confident about something they have written later.

For example, if you work on a transition together, help them write a) another transition, b) a variation of the transition you just revised, c) key words that will be needed in the next transitions, or d) the steps to write a transition. Not only will they show themselves what they understand, but they will also show you what they understand. Sometimes, you think one message has been delivered, and then, when they write the target element, you realize a different one was received. Something written allows you to correct miscommunications.

<u>Wait and Listen More</u>
In sessions, we rely a lot on what clients choose to tell us. There are two potential problems with this. First, sometimes clients cannot articulate their exact concerns or questions—think of the last time you got a haircut and had to explain what you wanted: did you use terminology your stylist learned at school or did you ask him to "make the ends spiky"? Secondly, we have heard a lot of clients say very similar things, so we may think we can guess what the client is going to say or what the client really means. To avoid assumptions and truly comprehend what your client needs, try the following when you feel confused or the client seems frustrated:
- When they are thinking or writing, resist anticipating what they will say or produce; instead practice clearing your mind or thinking of a resource that may help them the next time they face this issue. You will be more open and more flexible without specific expectations.
- Speak less. Let pauses happen, even long ones. Just smile encouragingly and wait. Then, repeat the *exact same thing you said* and write part of the target product or an example of the target product. Clients almost always try to fill the silence or admit not understanding eventually.

EXAMPLE: Aaron always agreed with what I said, never asked questions, and would not speak until I did. He repeated language from the book and my words. Consequently, I could never tell what he was thinking or if he understood what he was supposed to write. So, I stopped suggesting four ways to do one thing. I also stopped talking. Slowly, after I stopped filling our time, Aaron began asking questions and using his own words. Sessions were often painfully quiet or halting, but, by the end of the semester, he spoke and wrote more fluently.

4. Resources

Use Examples
When working with multilingual clients, use resources, whether online or in the binder, more often. Why? Examples are your friends. They focus the discussion and act as a representative for a category of questions.

Consider the following: Students from Russia and Eastern Europe are sometimes taught to use the passive voice in formal writing. Students from Europe and Africa are sometimes taught to report information and then analyze in the conclusion paragraph only. Without an example of an analytical paragraph in active voice, you will have a lot of things to describe to these clients, and the more hypothetical a discussion is, the least useful it is for someone trying to match your words against their background knowledge.

Avoid Grammar "Traps"
As a fluent speaker and writer, you trust your ear and probably do not have all the English grammar rules or English collocations memorized. So, when a client asks why a professor has deleted a certain word or questioned style, you may not have an immediate answer. When this happens, express interest and turn to a vocabulary resource. Why? Otherwise, you may doubt your own ear due to the intensity of the client's confusion or skepticism. Also, if you quickly write an example you think is correct, you may inadvertently include some word or grammar expression that raises new questions. With a verified example sentence in front of you, you can limit the scope of questions and validate your ear (or learn something new).

Remember: If you cannot find the perfect example sentence to explain a grammar or word choice issue, just bring one the next week. In the scheme of a typical session, give yourself a pass for not always being able to answer a sentence-level question right away. English has numerous inconsistencies that have developed over time.

EXAMPLE: In each of the following sentences, the professor marked a usage error that confused Yoko:

1. According to the movie *The Railway Man*, Eric Lomax **hardly** forgives Nagase, who was one of Japanese torturers and Lomax was haunted by his terrible nightmares and flashbacks.

The student wrote "hardly" because Lomax had a "hard" time forgiving Nagase, so she added "–ly" to create an adverb form that could modify "forgives." Her professor had underlined it and written a question mark by it. After trying to explain the possible meanings of "hardly" in this context, I looked up "forgive" on ozdic.com. The client could see that "hardly" was not listed as a collocation with "forgive," and we do not use it in this sense.

2. People can understand each suffering **due to** forgiving each other, and they can make deep relationships.

Unfortunately, ozdic.com does not cover transition words or subordinating conjunctions in depth. When a term is not covered on ozdic.com, review example sentences on oxforddictionaries.com or similar site that model grammar and usage. To explain why "due to" had been marked "awkward," the client needed to see several examples of the word in action. Only after seeing multiple examples did she see that a measurable, countable incident or process must follow "due to" (She stopped playing soccer due to the injury.). We changed "due to" to "during the process of."