

**“WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO SAY?”
----- ESL STUDENTS’ EXPECTATION OF WRITING
CONFERENCES**

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher-student conferences have been an important component in many college composition courses. Previous research has focused on conferences in the setting of English as the first language. A number of researchers and teachers have noted the effectiveness of conferences in teaching writing (Fritts, 1976; Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Gitzen, 2002) and the discourse of the interaction (Freedman & Sperling 1985; Walker & Elias 1987, Newkirk 1995; Sperling, 1990, 1991). A review of literature reveals conflicting views on the roles of the participants and the foci of the conferences. Moreover, the existing research examines the conference as an independent discourse without extending the investigation to the context of the interaction (such as participants’ expectations and perceptions).

Much less attention has been paid to the practice of teacher-student conferences in ESL writing instruction. What do ESL students expect from the writing conferences? Do they have different expectations from their American counterparts? If so, what factors contribute to the difference? The answers to these questions are not readily available from the existing research on writing conferences. Previous studies have focused on the teacher (such as teacher talk) or have been conducted from the teacher’s perspective. The main purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of the writing conference from the students’ perspective. With this purpose, this study sets out to examine the expectations of 110 students (65 American students and 45 ESL students enrolled in a first-year composition class in a southwestern university in the United States).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Writing conferences have been recognized as an effective way to provide feedback on students’ drafts. Studies in L1 settings have analyzed the patterns of the interaction and the effects of the conferences. There has been a controversy on whether the teacher should dominate the conference (Freedman and Sperling, 1985; Walker and Elias, 1987; Ulichny and Waterson-Gegeo, 1989; Walker, 1992). Nevertheless, very few studies have investigated conferences from the students’ perspectives. Newkirk (1995) conducted simultaneous recall and interviews with a teacher and students after writing conferences to explore their perceptions. He identified five categories of miscommunication in the conference: confusion about terminology, the nature of the questions, concerns about audience, concerns about specific

expectations or rules, and responsibility for sustaining the conversation. He noted that some students had difficulty with the conversational norms as well as the terminology used in the writing conferences, which led to students' limited participation in the interaction. The teacher sometimes reverted to monologues to reduce stress experienced by the students and to avoid a breakdown in the conversation. Newkirk then questioned the emphasis on empowering students and the avoidance of teacher dominance in writing conferences promoted in previous literature. He concluded that fluidity in the role of teacher and student in the writing conference is necessary to maximize the benefits of the interaction.

To further investigate the issue of teacher dominance, Demott (2006) studied scaffolding in the conference, "the most frequently used theoretical construct for examining writing conferences" (Newkirk, 1995, p.195). Contrary to what Sperling (1990, 1991) suggested, it was noted that scaffolding was not a pervasive type of interaction during the conferences. Students preferred directive instruction, recognized the teacher's authority and hesitated to question the authority. These findings support Newkirk's claim on the limitation of scaffolding that "scaffolding cannot illuminate the cross purposes, the resistances, the concealed feelings and attitudes – the unsaid and unsayable – that are surely a part of writing conferences" (Newkirk, 1995, p.195). The study suggests that the dynamics of the conference interaction are influenced by the participants' perception of their roles in the conference, especially students' perceptions.

These studies indicate the importance of understanding students' needs and perceptions when conducting a successful conference. Some second language writers do not feel confident with their writing, and might be intimidated by facing the teacher directly with their writing. Little research has been done on students' needs and expectations of the conference. The existing studies have investigated the effect of writing conferences on students' subsequent revision. Goldstein and Conrad (1990) found that students who negotiated the meaning in the conferences made revisions in the following draft that improved the text. In contrast, when students did not negotiate meaning, they tended either not to make revisions or only make some surface-level changes that do not lead to significant improvement over the previous drafts. Goldstein and Conrad thus emphasized that students need to be taught the purposes of the conference and that the conference discourse and the teacher-student relationship are different from those in the classroom. Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997) also note the different effects of conferences on stronger students and weaker students. While the conferences helped improve the quality of the texts by both groups, stronger students seemed to benefit more from the conferences. In conferences with stronger students, teachers were less directive and students were more assertive. Moreover, unlike weaker students who simply revised their drafts following the teacher's suggestions in the conferences, stronger students produced more substantial revisions. This showed the systematic relationship between the conference interaction and students' characteristics. Results of both studies suggest that conferences

between American teachers and ESL students can be different from those between American teachers and American students. The diverse cultures and languages of the ESL students might influence how they behave at the conference and how their teachers respond to them.

Han (1996) investigated ESL students' perceptions of the conference. He found that students' perceptions were centered around their essays, the teacher and themselves. After the conference they did not care as much about what happened at the conference as about the revisions they needed to make. There were misconceptions of the teachers' comments and suggestions. These perceptions of the writing conference were attributed to various factors, such as students' prior learning experiences, preconceived notions of the proper teaching approach, social and cultural factors, and their perceived self-efficacy. In her study on interactional influences on L2 writing conferences, Chen (2005) interviewed both ESL students and teachers on their beliefs and expectations about the writing conference. Although all of the students had the expectation that the conferences would be helpful, some students had anxieties about the interaction. For example, some students felt nervous about talking with the teacher in English; others thought they had to ask questions to sustain the conference. Teachers' expectations varied as well. Some expected to lead the conversation themselves while others expected the students to lead the conversation. Analysis of the conference indicates that the progress of the conference mirrored these expectations.

To sum up the studies on the writing conference, it has been noted that the face-to-face interaction plays a significant role in students' writing process in improving the drafts. But to what extent students can benefit from the conference depends on the interaction patterns and perception of the participants. Based on the finding of previous studies, the present study addresses the following questions:

What are ESL students' expectations towards the teacher-student writing conferences? Are they different from expectations held by their American counterparts? If yes, what factors contribute to the difference?

METHOD

Setting

The study was conducted in a southwestern university in the United States. First-year composition, English 101 and 102 (English 107 and 108 for ESL students), are required for all undergraduates enrolled in this university. All entering ESL students must take a placement examination at the beginning of each semester. The results of this exam place them in ENGL106, 107, or 108. English 106 is the lowest one for ESL students who need additional help to meet the writing requirement at the college level. So for many ESL students, English 107 is their first writing class at college. The regular enrollment of these sections is 25. There are also combined sections with about 12 ESL students and 12 American students. Each year, especially in the

fall semester, the writing program needs to accommodate the increasing number of freshmen enrolled in English 101 or 107. In the fall of 2007 when the data was collected, there were 171 sections for English 101 and 5 sections for English 107. Two of the 5 English 107 sections were combined with English 102 sections.

The goal of ENGL101/107 is "to develop your critical thinking skills, introduce you to research and writing strategies, and improve your ability to read and write at the college level" (ENGL101/107 syllabus). In this course, students read a variety of literary texts and apply different methods of analysis. Over the semester, students are required to write three major essays: textual analysis, cultural analysis, and text-in-context analysis. Each of these papers involves multiple drafts and writing workshops because the writing process is a major emphasis in the writing class.

With this emphasis, the process-oriented approach is adopted in the writing program and characterized by prewriting, drafting, evaluating, getting external feedback and revising. Evaluating and getting external feedback include peer review and teacher feedback. Peer review is often held in the classroom, while teacher feedback is usually provided in two ways. One way is to provide written feedback on students' drafts and the other way is to provide oral feedback in teacher-student conferences which could be an individual conference, with the instructor talking with the students one on one, or a group conference, with the instructor talking with a group of students. The group conference might incorporate both peer review and teacher feedback. Usually, one student introduces his/her draft, then other students comment on it, and finally the instructor provides comments. In either form of the conferences, the instructor comments on the students' drafts and offers suggestions on how the students could revise their papers for the final version.

Participants

There were approximately 115 students in the five participating sections, all of which were English 101 or 107 sections. These English 101/107 sections that were selected represent the first composition class at college for most students and students are more homogenous than those enrolled in English 102/108. Questionnaire data were collected from 110 students (45 ESL students and 65 American students) from the participating sections.

Design

The main methodology of the study was questionnaire and interview. At the beginning of the study, a survey was conducted to examine students' writing experiences and expectations of the writing conferences. I provided one version for ESL students and one for American students (see appendix). There were three parts in the questionnaire. The first part asked for students' demographic information, including age, gender, home country and native

language. The second part asked for students' experience with writing classes, such as the number of classes they have taken, the activities in the writing classes, and the genres of the writing assignments. The third part asked for students' expectations of the writing conferences. In the second and third parts, I used multiple choice and open questions to elicit more information.

The choices in the questionnaire were designed based on my own experience as a writing instructor, communication with students and other instructors, as well as the literature on writing conferences. At the beginning of every semester, I asked my own students to write about their experience with their previous writing classes to get a better understanding of the students. I also conducted informal surveys with my students when scheduling conferences by having them write down questions and concerns about their drafts and their expectations. Holding conferences with my own students and discussing these topics with other instructors give me good insights on students' expectations. Together with the studies on writing conferences, all these helped me construct the survey.

With the permission from the instructors, I administered the survey at the beginning of the fall semester, 2007 to six English 101 or 107 classes. The survey took about five minutes at the beginning of the class. I explained to the students the purpose of the survey and told them that participation in the survey was voluntary. It was not, however, anonymous, as I needed to relate the survey answers of the focus students to their videotaped data. So I explained to the students that the answers can only be accessed by myself as the researcher and I would not reveal them to their instructors. Therefore, their grades in the course would not be affected in any way. Some students were still concerned about the privacy. Finally, 110 students completed the survey, including 18 focus students (7 American students and 11 ESL students) who agreed to be interviewed.

To validate the survey data, I also conducted interviews with the 18 focus students before they met their instructor for the conferences. With participants' permission, I recorded all the interviews with a digital voice recorder and took some brief notes. After the 18 focus student participants scheduled their conference, I interviewed them about their expectations on the conferences before they met their instructor for the conferences. Participating students were asked to come 10 minutes earlier than their scheduled conference and I interviewed them outside of the instructor's office (See Appendix III for the sample questions).

In the pre-conference interviews, I also validated students' survey answers by asking students why they made that choice in the survey. For example, I asked, "why did you choose the option "I expect my instructor to correct all grammar errors in my draft"?" or "Why do you want to ask your instructor the requirements of the essay? Are you unsure of the requirements?"

RESULTS

Demographic Data

Of the 110 participating students, 65 were native speakers of English (20 male and 45 female) and 45 were nonnative speakers of English (31 male and 14 female). All of the 65 native speakers are American students ranging between 18 and 20. 60 out of 65 (92.3%) were freshmen and only five of them were sophomores at the time of the survey.

The nonnative speaking group was much more heterogeneous than the native speaking group. The 45 students surveyed came from 16 countries all over the world, speaking 13 different languages. The three largest language groups are Mandarin Chinese speakers (14), Spanish speakers (7), and Korean speakers (6). Other languages spoken included Arabic, Japanese, Hindi, Thai, Kazakh, Russian, German, French, Greek and Macedonian. Their age varied from 17 to 26. Their academic levels at the university also varied from freshman to senior. The group consisted of 32 freshmen (71%), 6 sophomores (13%), 5 juniors (11%) and 2 seniors (5%).

Previous Experience in the Writing Class

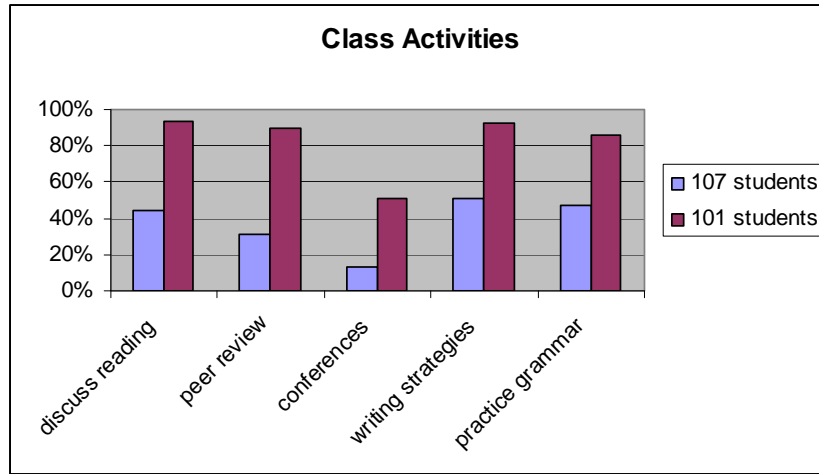
The second part of the survey asks about students' experience in the writing class. 55 (84.6%) of American students had taken four English writing classes in high school, 7 (10.7%) of them had taken more than four writing classes, and 3 (4.6%) of them had taken two or three. For 52 students out of 65 (80%), English 101, the class they were taking, was the first writing class at the college level. The other 13 students (20%) took one or two other college writing classes before they took the current one. When asked about the activities in the writing classes, they reported discussing readings, practicing writing strategies, peer review, and practicing grammar mostly. Contrary to my assumption that the majority of American students have had conferences in high school, only half of them had this experience. The description of what happened in the conference was virtually the same. They reported discussing their paper with the instructor and receiving suggestions on how to improve the paper. For the ESL students, their experience in previous writing classes was much more limited than their American counterparts. 20 (44.5%) of them had never taken any writing class prior to the one they were taking, English 107. 14 (31%) had taken one or two writing classes and 11 (24.5%) had taken three or more classes. Considering the length of learning English of these students, it was obvious that most of the ESL students must have taken English language classes rather than writing classes in their home country. Thus, the activities which are common practices in American writing classrooms, especially the writing conferences and peer review, were not familiar to the majority of the ESL students. This can be seen in the following table and figure.

Table 1: Students' Past Experience in the Writing Class

Class activities	107 Students (N = 45)		101 Students (N = 65)	
	count	percentage	count	percentage
Discussing readings	20	44.4%	61	93.8%
Peer review	14	31.1%	58	89.2%
Conferences	6	13.3%	33	50.8%
Writing strategies	23	51.1%	60	92.3%
Practice grammar	21	46.7%	56	86.2%

The percentage of the students who have experienced the five class activities is shown in the chart below.

Figure 1: Students' Past Experience in the Writing Class

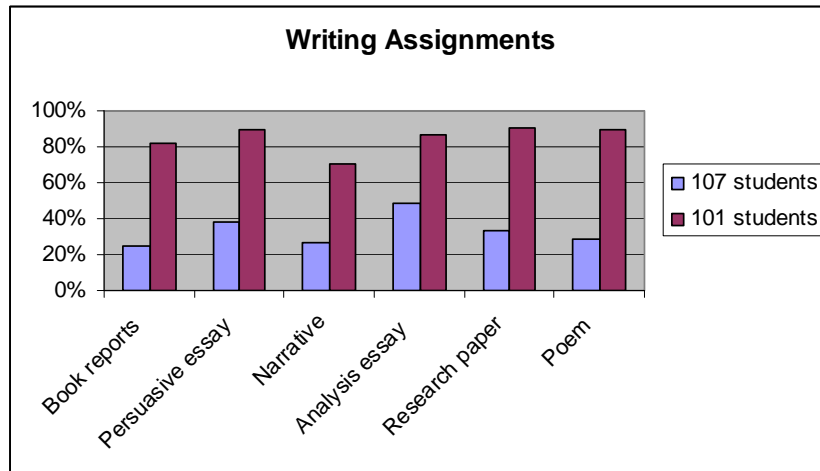


As for the type of assignments they did before, most of the American students had practiced all of the genres listed on the survey: book reports, persuasive, narrative, analysis, research paper and poem. In contrast, only a small number of ESL students had written the types of assignments listed. The types of writing assignments are shown in the following table.

Table 2: Genres of the Writing Assignments

Writing Assignments	107 Students (N = 45)		101 Students (N = 65)	
	count	percentage	count	percentage
Book reports	11	24.4%	53	81.5%
Persuasive essay	17	37.8%	58	89.2%
Narrative	12	26.7%	46	70.8%
Analysis essay	22	48.9%	56	86.2%
Research paper	15	33.3%	59	90.8%
Poem	13	28.9%	58	89.2%

Figure 2: Genres of the Writing Assignments

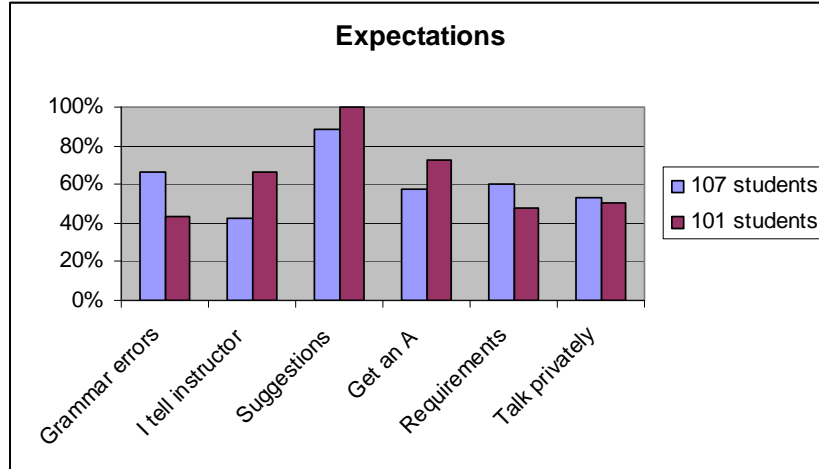


Expectations of the Conference

The third part of the survey asks for students’ expectations of the teacher-student conference. From the table below, we can see similarities and differences in the expectations between the two groups. All of the American students and the majority of ESL students expected the instructor to give them suggestions on how to improve their drafts. This reveals the desire for teacher feedback from students in both groups. (literature on teacher feedback) This also shows students’ perception of the primary goal of the writing conference – the instructor is supposed to provide suggestions on how to improve the student’s draft.

Table 3: Expectations of the Writing Conferences

Expectations	107 Students (N = 45)		101 Students (N = 65)	
	count	percentage	count	percentage
Grammar errors	30	66.7%	28	43.1%
I tell instructor	19	42.2%	43	66.2%
Suggestions	40	88.9%	65	100%
Get an A	26	57.8%	47	72.3%
Requirements	26	59.8%	31	47.7%
Talk privately	24	53.3%	33	50.8%

Figure 3: Expectations of the Writing conferences

About half of the students from both groups expressed that they enjoyed talking with the instructor privately and they think the conference can help enhance a better personal relationship with the instructor. No gender difference has been found regarding this expectation. The two groups also shared the same expectation that they want the instructor to tell them how to get an A on the essay. More American students have this concern for the grade. As first-year composition is a required course for all undergraduate students, receiving good grades on this course can be the primary motivation for most students. But ESL learners have stronger integrative motivation, the desire to integrate into the discourse community (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). So for many of them, getting an A is not the ultimate purpose of taking the course. In the interviews, a lot of them expressed the eagerness to improve their writing skills.

The difference lies in the expectations of “grammar errors”, “I tell instructor”, and “requirements”. Clearly, more ESL students would expect the instructor to correct their grammar errors at the conference. This is not surprising as ESL students are more concerned about the accuracy in their writing. A good number of American students also had this expectation, and one of them added “most general errors” below the option. This shows that even as native speakers of English, some American students did worry about grammar errors, but they did not think correcting grammar errors was the most important task at the writing conferences. One of the American students even commented on the survey, “it (correcting grammar errors) would be a waste of time”.

Fewer ESL students expected to tell the instructor their intention and meaning in their essay. It seems that most of them did not think this as important, while the majority of the American students had this expectation. Moreover, more ESL students expected to ask the instructor the requirements of the essay.

Verification from the Pre-conference Interview Data

After the survey was collected, the participating instructors scheduled conferences with their students. I scheduled brief interviews with 18 students (7 American students and 11 ESL students) before and after the conferences. More lengthy interviews were conducted with the Chinese students. In the interviews, I verified the survey answers with some of the students and asked additional questions regarding their writing process and challenges.

Previous experience in the writing class

The survey results indicate that ESL students lack the experience of writing classes that most American students had in high school. I asked about this in more detail in the interview with ESL students. As most of them had learned English in a foreign country, writing was only one part of the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) practiced in English classes. Few students had ever taken a writing class prior to the one they were taking. For those who had taken one, they took it at CESL which prepares them for the language test which they had to pass to be admitted to the university. The English essays they had practiced were short (150-300 words) with only three paragraphs. Therefore, many of them struggled with the essays in their first academic writing class – English 107. They also reported that the essays the students wrote before were distinctly different from what they wrote in ENGL 107. With a lack of practice with similar essays, most of them had difficulties writing longer and more complicated essays. One of the ESL students even complained in his interview, "...English 101 is great for American students in the first year, but not for international students. We have such a hard time".

In contrast, most American students have practiced five-paragraph essays in high school in various genres. Some of the essays they wrote before are similar to the ones in English 101. More importantly, many American students had conference experience in high school, discussing their essays with the teacher. One American student told me that she had conferences in her senior year in high school although it was unscheduled drop-in office hours. She had the chance to talk with her teacher about her essays. With prior experience in conferences, American students were clearer about what would happen in the conference and what to expect from the conference.

Expectations of the conference

In the pre-conference interviews, I also verified the five expectations listed in the survey. While students were waiting outside the instructor's office, I asked students about their feelings toward their current drafts and their expectations of the conferences. I first asked them what they thought of their own drafts. All the seven American students responded that they felt good about their drafts. They can identify their own strengths and weaknesses

in their draft. At the point of the interview, they were working on their second or third essay. So they expressed that they were doing a better job than in the first essay.

The first expectation listed on the survey was having the instructor point out all the grammar errors in the draft. It is not surprising that more ESL students than American students made this choice. All of the ESL students interviewed mentioned grammar errors as one of the weaknesses or concerns in their drafts. One Indian student said directly, "I expect her to list all my errors, any grammar errors." As shown in the survey, some American students were concerned about the grammar in their drafts as well. All students believe grammatical accuracy is an important aspect of good writing. ESL students were particularly struggling with it and would like the instructor to provide help in this aspect.

The survey also asked if the students want to tell the instructor what they are trying to say in their drafts. Results show that more American students made this choice than ESL students. In the pre-conference interview, I asked the students if they have anything to tell the instructor. Most ESL students simply responded that they did not know what to tell the instructor or they did not have much to tell the instructor. They just wanted the instructor's opinions and suggestions. Some of them wanted to ask questions about the requirement of the assignment and conventions of academic writing, such as paragraph structure and organization. For American students, they seemed to have a better idea of what to talk about in the conference. After they told me their weaknesses and difficulties in that draft, they expected the teacher to address these issues in the conference. Other American students came to the conference with more questions in mind, such as: How can I begin my introduction? Does my conclusion look okay? What can I do to expand the analysis? These questions indicate that the American students knew better how to elicit suggestions from the teacher.

One obvious phenomenon in the survey data is that almost all students (both American and ESL students) expected the instructor to tell them how to get an A in the conference. And many of the students explicitly verbalized this expectation in their pre-conference interview. As they knew that the instructor assigns the final grade, they wanted to know what exactly the instructor expected them to do to get a good grade.

Another expectation revealed in the survey data is to ask the instructor the requirements of the essay. This is closely related to their expectation on how to receive a good grade. The students wanted to make sure their essays meet the requirements set by the instructor so that they could receive a better grade. As one of the American students said, "Conferences allow me to see the teacher's style, what she wants to see in the paper, what exactly the assignment was, the interpretation of the assignment." One Chinese student also expressed, "As for the conference, I want to know her expectation, so I will write according to her expectation." Students' testimony shows that they value the instructor's expectation because it is what their essays would be graded upon.

The last expectation listed on the survey reveals students' need for close personal relationship with the teacher. Almost all the students interviewed expressed their desire for this kind of one-on-one interaction with the teacher. Some students explained to me why they made this choice. One female American student told me that the personal connection to the instructor is very important – "The more I talk with her, the more comfortable we feel when discussing paper". Other students (both American and ESL) also told me that they enjoyed the one-on-one conversation with the instructor because the instructor can focus his or her attention on a single person's writing, addressing individual concerns. One Chinese student said, "I feel more comfortable talking with him privately. Sometimes I have trouble expressing myself in a group." Another Chinese student confessed that "I feel nervous about talking in English". These students felt safer and less nervous when talking to the instructor alone.

Writing process of ESL students

To find out the factors that influence students' perceptions on the conference, I asked the six Chinese students about the process of writing a draft during my interview with them. Different strategies of writing emerged in the interview. Some students wrote multiple drafts and utilized different sources of support in the revision process. Other students just worked on a single draft and relied on themselves in the drafting process. Take Ying (pseudo name), a female Chinese student, as an example, she worked very hard on each of her essays. She started drafting early before the essay was due and made six drafts by the time her essay was completed. She wrote her first draft and met with a tutor in the Writing Center. She then brought a revised draft for the peer review in class, as required by her instructor. After she got some feedback from her classmates, she made another draft and visited her instructor in her office hours (before the scheduled conference). She then made further revisions based on her instructor's comments. When she went to the scheduled conference, she had a comparatively mature draft. She then made a final tune-up before she turned in the final draft. Her efforts earned her good grades on all her essays.

Not all the Chinese students were like Ying. Some others did not see the importance of drafting at all. One male Chinese student said, "drafts are not useful. There is no need to write too many drafts." Another Chinese student echoed, "Chinese students don't care about drafts. Drafts are not graded anyway". When asked about their previous writing experience, they told me that they never made drafts before. They just wrote the essay and submitted it for the grade. So they adopted the same strategy in writing the current essays. Some of them did outline in Chinese before writing in English. Although their instructor did require rough drafts, they did not start the actual essay until the day when the essay was due. For the rough drafts, they just wrote a few paragraphs. In the class workshops, these Chinese students tended to work in the same group. After the workshops, they confessed to me that

they did not learn from reading each other's drafts as nobody really cared about the rough drafts. They seldom visited the Writing Center or the instructor's office hours because they think it was "troublesome". They did expect to get some help from the scheduled writing conference to work on their drafts. Some of them had their American roommates read their drafts before the essay was due. For the final draft, some of them could not meet the length requirement and others lost credit on the language use. It is clear that the writing process directly affected their final product.

In the interview, I also asked students about their attitudes towards peer review. I asked them if they got useful feedback from their classmates in the peer review. The answer was mixed. Some students reported positive results and acknowledged that they learned from reading other's drafts as well. Other students did not think much of the peer review process for several reasons. Firstly, they questioned the credibility of their peers. Ying said, "Peer review did not help much. The questions on the peer review sheet are kind of basic. Students were not doing it carefully and none of us are experts. Those with stronger language ability could help more." Secondly, they did not think their peer would take full responsibility of others' writing. A female American student said, "Peer review did not help. I want someone to tell me what I need. Peers do not take it seriously." Some students would prefer to have friends read their drafts because friends would take it more seriously. Students' attitudes towards the peer review influenced their attitudes towards the writing conference. Those who did not value peer review tended to value the conference more because they thought only the instructor could serve as an expert to provide good suggestions on their drafts.

DISCUSSION

In general, the results of the study support Han's (1996) findings in that all students expected that the conference would help them in their revision. Although a few ESL students had anxieties towards the interaction, because they were unfamiliar with the practice and nervous about talking with the teacher in English, most of the students were looking forward to this private conversation with the teacher. The survey results and interview have revealed a clear picture of students' expectations towards the conferences. More ESL students were concerned with the accuracy of their writing and expected the instructor to point out all grammatical errors in their draft, which is almost impossible in reality. This expectation corresponds to results of the studies which have investigated ESL students' preferences on teacher feedback. Students in most of these studies expressed strong preferences for teacher feedback on language issues (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Similar to the participants in this study, students in Radecki & Swales (1988) "expect the instructor to correct all their surface errors" in the written feedback (p.362). It is therefore not surprising that students have the same desire in the oral teacher feedback.

Moreover, more ESL students wanted to ask the instructor the requirements for the essay. This can be explained by their unfamiliarity with the writing assignments, as shown in the second part of the survey. Although the requirements for each assignment are usually described in the handout and explained in class discussion, it is understandable that students want to clarify these requirements with the instructor at the conference. It should be also noted that a considerable number of American students also had this expectation despite the fact that they had practiced with various assignments before. As indicated in the previous part of the survey, ENGL101 was the first college writing class for nearly all American students. They might have realized that writing at the college level is different from writing in high school and expected to ask about the requirements.

Another difference between the two groups is shown on the expectation that "I want to tell my instructor what I am trying to say in my draft". More American students than ESL students chose this option. This expectation is related to the schemata regarding the teacher-student relationship in college settings and the ownership of the writing. In the North American context, the teacher-student relationship is referred to as "a socialized pattern for learning through performance rather than observation" (Koshik, 2002, p.1870). In this pattern, students are expected to display their abilities to the teacher rather than by observing teachers while teachers are expected to elicit students' performance, and assist students. Brought up in this kind of educational context, American students can have stronger feelings of the ownership of their writing and would like to negotiate with the instructor on how to express their ideas in writing. The schema of teacher-student relationships is different in other cultures. For example, influenced by Confucianism, the interpersonal relationship in social interaction in China is hierarchical. As Scollon and Scollon (1995) argued, "most Asians are quite conscious in an interaction who is older and who is younger, who has a higher level of education, who has lower level, who is in a higher institutional or economic position and who is lower, or who is teacher and who is student." (p. 81) The speaker in the higher position has the control of the interaction. Thus, it would be inappropriate for a student to introduce a topic of his or her own in a communication with a teacher. It is interesting to note that out of the 26 ESL students who did not choose the option of telling the instructor what they are trying to do in the draft, 19 (73.1%) were from Asian countries. Out of the 14 Chinese students, 9 did not choose this option. In the follow-up interviews, when asked whether they had anything to tell the instructor in the conference, most of the Chinese students responded that they only wanted to know what the instructor suggested for them to do.

This expectation also is related to students' experiences with writing conferences. As indicated in the second part of the survey, only six ESL students had previous experience with a writing conference. In their description of the conference experience, five of them said the instructor gave them advice on their essay. The other one described, "my instructor discovered many mistakes about grammar & run on sentences & vague sentences". None

of them seemed to have taken an active role in the conference by telling the instructor what they wanted to express in their writing. The same is also true for American students. Among the 13 students who opted out the expectation to tell the instructor what they are trying to say in the draft, only 4 of them had experience with a conference before. In contrast, out of the 20 American students who chose this option, 13 had previous conference experience. In the description of this experience, most of them said, “we discussed / talked about the essay I was writing and he/she gave me his input on how to improve it”. Compared to their ESL counterparts with conference experience, American students took a more active role in their previous conferences, at least from their own account. So more of them had the expectation to negotiate with the instructor about their writing. This result shows students’ perceptions are influenced by their previous experience with the writing conference.

Another factor that influences students’ expectations are students’ individual writing processes and their attitude towards peer review. Students who did not receive multiple sources of feedback tended to rely more on the teacher feedback. So they expected the instructor to tell them exactly what to do at the conference. Most of the students interviewed thought that peer feedback is helpful, but the teacher feedback is more authoritative and trustworthy. This echoes Miao et al’s (2008) finding that Chinese EFL students see teacher feedback as more authoritative but value peer comments. This attitude towards teacher feedback is clearly reflected in students’ expectations of the writing conferences.

CONCLUSION

Both ESL students and American students expect to receive feedback on their drafts at the writing conference. ESL students, not familiar with the dynamic feature of the conference, expect the instructor to directly tell them what to do without planning to explain their own thoughts. These student expectations are shaped by factors beyond individual preferences. This study reveals that students’ perceptions of writing conferences are influenced by their previous experience in writing, their writing process, and perception towards different sources of feedback. Although teachers do not necessarily improve their teaching by accommodating all of their students’ needs, it is important they listen to student voices and incorporate students’ expectations in conducting conferences. On the other hand, as Lee (2008) argues, “the teachers’ feedback, which was mostly teacher-centered, made students passive and dependent on teachers.” (p.1). Future research could examine how teachers can adjust the methods and formats of their feedback to involve more student autonomy and to maximize the benefits of the feedback.

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APPENDIX I: Survey Questionnaire for ENGL101 students

Writing Experience and Expectation Survey

Name: _____
Last First

Sex: Male () Female () Age: ()

Native Country: _____

Native Language(s): _____

Academic Major: 1) My major is _____
2) Haven't decided _____

Academic Level: Freshman _____ Sophomore _____ Junior _____
Senior _____ Other (please indicate) _____

How many English writing classes did you have in high school?
0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ More than 4 _____

How many English writing classes did you have in college before the one you
are taking?
0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ More than 4 _____

What did you do in your previous writing courses (please select all the options
that apply)?

Class activities: discussion of readings _____
Peer review _____
Teacher-student conferences _____
Practice on writing strategies (such as paragraph development)
_____ Practice on grammar _____
Others (please indicate in the blank)

Writing assignments: Book report _____
Persuasive essay _____
Narrative _____
Analysis essay _____
Research paper _____

Poem _____
Others (please indicate in the blank)

If you have had conferences with your instructor before (prior to the current one), brief describe what happened in the conference.

Which of the following are your expectations/perceptions about the teacher-student writing conferences (check as many as applicable):

____ I am expecting my instructor to point out all the grammar errors in my draft.

____ I want to tell my instructor what I am trying to say in my draft.

____ I am expecting my instructor to give me suggestions on how to improve my draft.

____ I want my instructor to tell me how to get an A on this essay.

____ I want to ask my instructor the requirements of the essay.

____ I enjoy talking with my instructor privately. I think the conference can help us better know each other personally.

____ Other expectations (please specify in the blank)

Appendix II Survey Questionnaire for ENGL107 students

ESL Writing Experience and Expectation Survey

Name: _____
 Last First

Sex: Male () Female () Age: ()

Native Country: _____

Native Language(s): _____

Academic Major: 1) My major is _____
 2) Haven't decided _____

Academic Level: Freshman _____ Sophomore _____ Junior _____
Senior _____ Other (please indicate) _____

How long did you learn English before you came to the U. S. A.?
 No. of Years _____ months _____

How long have you been in U.S.A.?
 No. of Years _____ months _____

How long have you been in other English-speaking countries if any?
 No. of Years _____ months _____

How many English writing classes did you have before the one you are taking?
 0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ More than 4 _____

What did you do in your previous writing courses (please select all the options that apply)?

Class activities: discussion of readings _____
 Peer review _____
 Teacher-student conferences _____
 Practice on writing strategies (such as paragraph development) _____
 Practice on grammar _____
 Others (please indicate in the blank)

Writing assignments: Book report _____

- Persuasive essay _____
- Narrative _____
- Analysis essay _____
- Research paper _____
- Poem _____
- Others (please indicate in the blank)

If you have had conferences with your instructor before (prior to the current one), brief describe what happened in the conference.

Which of the following are your expectations/perceptions about the teacher-student writing conferences (check as many as applicable):

_____ I am expecting my instructor to point out all the grammar errors in my draft.

_____ I want to tell my instructor what I am trying to say in my draft.

_____ I am expecting my instructor to give me suggestions on how to improve my draft.

_____ I want my instructor to tell me how to get an A on this essay.

_____ I want to ask my instructor the requirements of the essay.

_____ I enjoy talking with my instructor privately. I think the conference can help us better know each other personally.

_____ Other expectations (please specify in the blank)

Appendix III Sample Interview Questions

The questions included but were not limited to:

- How do you like your draft so far?
- What do you think are the strong points and weak points of the draft?
- What would you like to revise in the next draft?
- What difficulties did you experience when writing this paper?
- How do you like the comments from your classmates?
- What would you like to tell your instructor at the conference?
- What is the most important thing you want to talk about at the conference?
- Do you think the conference will help you with your paper? Why or why not?
- Do you feel nervous or uncomfortable about going to the conference?