International Graduate Students’ interactions with their Writing Tutors and the Role of Writing Center in their Academic Experiences

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ABSTRACT

INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS’ INTERACTIONS WITH THEIR WRITING TUTORS AND THE ROLE OF WRITING CENTER IN THEIR ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

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Northern Illinois University, 2021
Jorge Jeria and Gudrun Nyunt, Co-Directors

The main purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the interactions of international students who were pursuing doctoral degrees at a public university in the Midwest (PUM) with their writing tutors. This study also explored how their writing center experiences contributed to their academic experiences.

Sociocultural theory and situated learning theory served as the conceptual framework for this qualitative case study. Sociocultural theory guided understanding of the nature of the interactions while situated learning revealed how the students’ experiences with their writing center coaches helped them join the U.S. academic community of practice through the socialization process.

Semi-structured interviews, observations, and artifacts related to the writing center were the major sources of data. The findings of the study revealed that international doctoral students’ visits to the writing center were not limited to seeking assistance with their academic papers. At first, students had mixed experiences with the writing center – with some having positive and others negative experiences in their initial sessions. However, through their frequent visits, these students developed as scholarly writers in their respective fields. The friendly, nonjudgmental, and supportive atmosphere provided by the tutors helped these
students join their academic communities of practice. Thus, this study’s findings regarding the writing center’s contribution to the international graduate students’ academic experiences suggest the need for U.S. higher education institutions to enhance and improve academic support services for this population of students through writing centers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I joined the Counseling and Higher Education Program to pursue a doctoral degree in adult and continuing education, I had so many reservations. Pursuing a doctoral degree seemed an impossible journey for me because it had been almost ten years since I finished my last graduate school program. However, after taking classes and meeting the wonderful professors in the program, I began to develop confidence because of their immense support and encouragement.

Overall, this journey has been an academic rollercoaster for me. I have experienced many challenges in trying to balance my life as a graduate student and a mother of two children. The outbreak of COVID-19 added additional challenges to my personal life and my life as a graduate student, causing stress and anxiety about changes in data collection because the Writing Center started to offer only online tutoring sessions. Due to this change, I had to reduce the number of observations from 30 to 15. However, despite the challenges, it has been a worthwhile experience because I have gained knowledge in the field of adult education while honing my research skills. Therefore, this program has contributed a lot to my growth as a scholar and a higher education practitioner.

I would like to express my gratitude to the department chair Susanne Degges-White, and staff members Jamie Colbert and Mary Kay Soesbe of the Higher Education and Student Affairs Program for their continuous support and encouragement. My special thanks go to my co-chairs, Prof. Jeria and Prof. Nyunt, who provided guidance and motivated me throughout my doctoral
journey. I am also grateful to my committee member Prof. Gyant for her guidance throughout dissertation process and beyond. Thank you for being a part of my committee.

I would like to acknowledge my professors: Dr. Gyant, Dr. Jaekel, Dr. Jeria, Dr. Kortegast, and Dr. Nyunt for the theoretical knowledge they provided about adult and higher education. I also extend my gratitude to the professors and staff members, especially Judy Puskar of the ETRA Department, for their academic support when I pursued a second master’s degree in research and evaluation.

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I also extend my gratitude to the Writing Center tutors Maxwell Hoover, Ashley Bartlett, and Neal Latino. Your feedback and support helped me become a better writer in my field. Your words of encouragement are highly appreciated!!!

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In this journey, I have met many wonderful people from around the world and together
we have created a community of practice of international students in which we shared our academic challenges and celebrated our success. Thus, I would like to acknowledge the support of my international friends, Behesten Abdi, Fortunata Msilu, Mastewal Seyeneh, Rakez Al-Arawah, Sheila Coli, and many others.

I would also like to take time to thank my dissertation participants. Without their willingness to participate, my dissertation would not have been accomplished. Thank you for sharing your perceptions of and interaction with the tutors at the Writing Center by being honest about your experiences. You helped me develop thick descriptions for the case study.

Finally, I am grateful to my immediate family who have become a great support system for me in my journey. Together we have been through a lot of things in these four years.
DEDICATION

In memory of my father, who served as a role model throughout my life
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Problem Statement

The presence of international students in U.S. higher education is important, as they contribute to the diversity of the student body at postsecondary institutions (Lee & Rice, 2007; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). International students bring different perspectives to American classrooms, foster appreciation of cultural differences, and prepare domestic students for working with people from different national and cultural backgrounds (Andrade, 2006; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012; Wu et al., 2015). In addition, they make a significant contribution to the U.S. economy, as the funding for their studies (83.5% of the undergraduate and 57.8% of the graduate students) is primarily drawn from personal or family sources (Institute of International Education, 2019). Despite making up only the 5.5% of the entire U.S. higher education enrollment, the 1,095,299 international students at U.S. colleges and universities contributed $41 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2018-2019 academic year (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2020). With the value and benefits they bring, international students are an important asset not only to their respective universities but also to local communities and regions across the nation (Kennedy, 2017).

However, the mere presence of international students in U.S. higher education institutions does not ensure positive learning outcomes or experiences for the students (Andrade, 2006). There are many challenges faced by international students while they pursue their degrees
in the United States. These difficulties mainly include academic challenges (Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Trice, 2003) due to a misunderstanding of the educational differences between their former learning institutions and the systems adopted in the United States as well as because of language and communication problems (Kuo, 2011; Lin & Scherz, 2014).

Studies that focus on international students’ academic experiences in the United States (e.g., Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007; Kim, 2012; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009) note the lack of knowledge about their challenges, demonstrating how critically they need academic services. Since academic challenges are primarily attributable to proficiency in English, appropriate support services are essential for international students to have positive academic experiences (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010).

Lack of English proficiency affects international students’ ability to succeed academically (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Investigations into international students’ academic experiences reveal the several challenges they face due to writing requirements at the American colleges (Chou, 2011; Wang & Yang, 2012). The lack of academic writing skills is mainly because many international students come from cultures in which they are not taught to write critically (Okuda & Anderson, 2018; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012).

Much of the literature on international students’ English language problems focuses on their language barriers in conversational English (e.g., Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007). However, little is known about international students’ written language problems and, consequently, their experiences with writing centers (Sherry et al., 2010). Writing centers can be of great academic support for international students at American colleges and universities by contributing to information about how to support improving the students’ writing skills (Liu & Brown, 2015; Moussu & David, 2015).
Purpose of the Study

Only few studies (e.g., Okuda & Anderson, 2018; Philipps, 2013; Rafoth, 2015) have examined international graduate students’ perspectives of the services that writing centers provide and the role of the writing centers in those students’ academic experiences at U.S. higher education institutions. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the writing center at a public university in the Midwest (PUM) shaped the academic experiences of international doctoral students through interactions with writing tutors.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do international doctoral students describe their interactions with the writing center tutors?
2. How does the writing center contribute to international doctoral students’ academic experience?

To answer the research questions, I focused on one case, the Writing Center at PUM. Through tutoring sessions, the Center provides academic support for all students, including international doctoral students. I chose the Writing Center as my case study because a significant number of the Center’s clientele are international doctoral students.

Significance of the Study

Few studies have examined international doctoral students’ experiences with writing centers. Much literature discussed these students’ struggle with English, detailing how the
writing center could serve as an important resource to overcome challenges related to their writing. As this study focused on the international doctoral students’ experiences and provided insight into their perceptions of tutoring sessions, the study’s findings also add to writing center research, which has few published empirical studies on international graduate students’ experiences with writing centers. This study’s findings also add to the literature on international students as this study examined the contributions of writing center tutoring sessions to international doctoral students’ academic experiences.

From a practical point of view, this study examined which tutoring strategies were perceived as effective by international doctoral students to meet their expectations of tutoring sessions. Findings showed that the Writing Center served for them not only a resource for improving writing skills but also had a potential of providing social support through the encouragement of tutors. Based on findings, this qualitative case made practical recommendations that maybe helpful in writing center practices for improving the ways they support international doctoral students.

Background and Context of the Problem

Overall, there has been a steady increase of international students in the past five years (Institute of International Education, 2018). The number of international students grew exponentially starting in 2011 as students from Saudi Arabia started to enroll at U.S. colleges at record levels (Rafoth, 2015). Although there was an increase of 1.5% in the number of international students enrolled in academic programs at U.S. higher education institutions in 2017/2018, the number of doctoral students saw a -1% change compared to 2016/2017 academic year (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2018). The drop was primarily due to the
decline in students from Saudi Arabia and India (Belkin, 2019). Moreover, graduate applications for other Middle Eastern and North African students fell 14% for the 2017/2018 academic year. Institutions that primarily offer master’s degrees were the most affected by the decline of international graduate students, as they experienced a 15% decline in master’s and certificate programs in 2017/2018 among new international graduate students (Belkin, 2019).

Restrictive U.S. federal policies and the increased competition from other countries, such as Canada, the U.K., and Australia, are the significant factors that contributed to recent decline of international student enrollment (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2020). The decline of the number of international students could negatively impact the U.S. economy, making additional academic support for international students even more important.

To address the second (increased competition), U.S. institutions need to make sure to provide the best experience possible for international students. Providing both academic and nonacademic support will contribute to students’ positive experience and help them succeed academically.

**Brief Overview of Research Design**

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore how the Writing Center at a public university in the Midwest (PUM) shaped international students’ academic experiences, with a primary focus on doctoral students. Case study is utilized when the researcher is interested in exploring a clearly bounded system in depth (Yin, 2009).

As my case, I chose the Writing Center that operates at PUM because it is an information-rich case. Specifically, the Writing Center provides academic support for many international students, particularly doctoral students. International doctoral students are known
for scheduling recurring appointments, which indicates that they perceive the help of the Writing Center as beneficial. The Center employs many graduate students who serve the graduate student population of the Center. Graduate-student tutors are much needed at writing centers, as they are more effective in interacting with international graduate students (Okuda & Anderson, 2018; Vorhies, 2015).

I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants through the Writing Center’s database. I collected data through semi-structured interviews with 17 international doctoral students who used the Writing Center on a regular basis and 15 observations of tutoring sessions (before the interview with 11 students and after the interviews with four students). Additionally, I examined Writing Center training materials pertinent to preparation of tutors for working with international or ESL (English as a second language) students and novice coaches’ blog.

Summary of Findings

Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory and its associated concepts, legitimate peripheral participation and community of practice, guided this study, helped me understand in depth the interactions of the students with tutors and how the writing center experience shaped their academic experiences at PUM.

The participants in my case study were representatives of different countries, including China, India, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Prior to coming PUM, most of them had already earned master’s degrees from their own countries or from U.S. or other foreign countries’ schools. Some participants saw themselves as proficient writers in their native languages and in English (particularly students from India and Pakistan). However, these students still faced
challenges when writing academic papers because of the rhetorical differences between American English and their native languages (or British English). Since the majority of participants in this study had limited interactions with their American peers and professors, primarily due to their lack of English proficiency, the Writing Center served as the primary and sometimes only academic support service they utilized. Findings indicated some international students’ experiences with Writing Center tutors were either negative or positive. Lack of English language skills and unmet expectations contributed to negative perceptions, whereas conducive environment for learning provided by tutors contributed to positive perceptions of sessions. Due to their frequent visits to the Center, some students built a long-term relationship with tutors. While reflecting on their interactions with tutors, the students highlighted the skills and knowledge of tutors, which helped them build long-term relationships with tutors.

Through friendly interactions with tutors, these students benefitted from scaffolded feedback as it helped them learn about academic rhetoric. For some students, the Writing Center served as place for academic socialization and interacting with native speakers, thereby helping improve their speaking skills. During tutoring sessions, students socialized with tutors to learn a lot about expectations of academic writing and research and improved not only their writing skills but also their research literacies. The participants’ perspectives about their interactions provided further insight into how students’ engagement with tutors helped them access knowledge and join the U.S. academic community. Specifically, the participants highlighted their growth as a scholar through friendly interactions with the tutors, which helped them not only get assistance with their academic papers but also evolve as writers in their disciplines over the course of their doctoral programs and learn how to advocate for themselves in academic spaces.
For some students, the Writing Center served as a social space where they interacted with native speakers and learned more about American culture. The analysis of the interview transcripts and observations indicated that international doctoral students’ experiences with the Writing Center had an overall positive impact on their academic experiences at PUM. The Writing Center served as the only academic support service to get academic assistance, not only to improve their writings but also to grow as scholars and participate in the community of practice by gaining knowledge on academic writing and research.

Limitations

There are several limitations inherent to a case study design (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001) as well as limitations specific to my study. I acknowledge the presence of these limitations, and I address them, so they do not weaken my study.

Although the qualitative case study findings of my study are not generalizable (Yin, 2009), they allow the reader to gain an in-depth analysis of the international doctoral students’ experiences with the Writing Center at PUM. It is plausible that international doctoral students from other American universities may share similar experiences when it comes to graduate-level writing; however, since writing centers have different structures depending on the size of institutions and their missions, the tutoring services they provide to international doctoral students may differ from those at PUM’s Writing Center. Consequently, PUM’s international doctoral students’ perceptions of and experiences with the Writing Center may not be true in other places. Replication studies could deepen understanding of the writing practices of international doctoral students and determine whether their experiences with writing centers are similar despite various institutional settings. For this purpose, I include a detailed case
description of the context of the study in my findings section. This will allow readers to draw their own conclusions regarding which aspects of my findings may apply to their unique contexts.

In addition, I limited the participants to only international doctoral students who frequently utilized the services of the Writing Center at PUM because I focused on unique perspectives of this subpopulation of students. Future research should focus on other sub-populations of international students, including undergraduate and master’s students, as their experiences with the Writing Center may be different from the experiences of doctoral students.

The second limitation was that I was looking at experiences of international doctoral students as a whole; however, this is not a monolithic group, but one that is made up of students from many different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, I recruited students from different countries and fields of study to the best of my ability (see demographic table in Chapter 3). Having a diverse sample in my study helped me understand various perceptions of and experiences with the Writing Center at PUM.

The third limitation of my case study was that I looked at the tutor-tutee relationship only from the tutee’s perspective rather than considering the tutors’ perspectives as well. This was a limitation because the tutees’ perceptions of a session and/or interaction could be different from the tutors’ perspectives. However, the goal of my study was to focus only on international students’ perspectives to understand how the Writing Center contributed to their academic experiences. Future research should, however, compare tutors’ and tutees’ perspectives concerning the Writing Center’s contribution to shaping academic experiences of international students.
Implications for Research and Practice

My findings suggested a need for further research, such as examining the change of students’ identities as scholars through socializing in tutoring sessions and improving their writing skills. Specifically, future research needs to look at the ways writing centers can support international graduate students, particularly doctoral students, in developing their identities as scholars.

Future research should also consider how race/ethnicity shape writing center experiences because my study did not examine how the writing center experience differed due to the ethnicity or nationality of participants. Moreover, examining tutor and tutee relationships from tutors’ perspectives would provide more insights into how the tutors perceive their relationships with tutees.

Further studies can also examine the misunderstandings that may exist in tutoring sessions, especially the ones related to unmet expectations, helping reveal the reasons for students’ dissatisfaction with tutoring sessions. International undergraduate students’ experiences with writing centers should also be examined in future studies because they may have different expectations than their graduate counterparts.

This research has also practical implications for developing writing center pedagogy and support programs to facilitate productive academic socialization. More robust academic writing support would be beneficial for improving access to and resources for diverse student populations and decrease attrition and time to degree completion for all students.
Outline of Chapters

Chapter 2 provides a conceptual framework and a review of the literature on international students’ experiences at U.S. higher education institutions as well as information on writing centers and their pedagogies and international students’ experiences with writing centers. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, including the research design, research questions, participants, role of the researcher, data collection, data analysis, limitations, and trustworthiness of the study. In Chapter 3, I also describe how I collected data from multiple sources using a variety of methods to gain in-depth understanding of the students’ interactions with their tutors. Specifically, I used the following data collection methods: a) semi-structured interviews with 17 participants; b) 15 observations of tutoring sessions; and c) the Writing Center’s database, training materials, and novice tutors’ blog. The data were analyzed through multiple rounds of coding to develop themes that shed light on international doctoral students’ experiences with the Writing Center. To improve the trustworthiness of the findings, I utilized triangulation, member checking, peer examination, and clarification of the researcher’s positionality (Merriam, 1998).

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the literature and the theoretical frameworks and makes recommendations for future research and practice.

Key Terms

**Doctoral student**: A student who pursues a doctoral degree.

**F-1 visa**: A nonimmigrant student visa issued to foreign students to pursue education in the United States. The main source of the students’ funding draws on their personal/family funds.
Graduate student: A student who pursues a higher degree after obtaining a bachelor’s degree.

International student: A person who was born and raised in another country and comes to America after obtaining F-1 or J-1 visa to pursue an undergraduate or graduate degree with the aim of returning to the home country upon completion of the degree (Rafoth, 2015).

J-1 visa: A nonimmigrant visa issued by the United States to foreign individuals who would like to visit the U.S. as part of a work and travel program or as a short-term international student or scholar. More than 50% of funding of the student comes from the United States or students’ own countries’ government in the form of a scholarship, fellowship, or sponsorship.

Tutor: Graduate or undergraduate students who have proficiency in a subject or skill-based area and provide academic assistance to other students. In a writing center context, the term refers to an undergraduate or graduate student who has some proficiency in academic writing and who assists students with their writing tasks.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In their pursuit of earning an academic degree, international students face many challenges when transitioning to academic life in the United States (Andrade, 2006; Arambewela, Hall, & Zuhair, 2006; Colombo, 2011; Mavondo, Tsarenko, & Gabbott, 2004; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Seyeneh, 2018; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). This literature review focuses on the challenges international students face and then presents a synthesis of relevant literature on how this transition can occur for international graduate students. Many studies on international students’ academic experiences focus on their English language challenges (Andrade, 2006; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011), stating that the U.S. higher education institutions’ writing centers could be a source of support (Chang, 2011; Colombo, 2011). Thus, I delved into literature on writing centers, their pedagogy, tutor relationships, and international graduate students’ experiences with writing centers. This chapter concludes with the theoretical framework of the study.

International Students’ Experiences

Much of the literature on international students documents the challenges they face when pursuing higher education in the U.S. Specifically, research addresses the general lack of language skills (Andrade, 2006; Chen & Yang, 2014; Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Halic, Greenberg, & Paulus, 2009; Özturgut, & Murphy, 2009; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012) without
making a distinction between oral and written. Additional challenges include cultural differences and acculturative stress (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Kuo, 2011; Mori, 2000), academic adjustment and socialization (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), and social support (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Westin, 2007).

Language Problems

Several studies have focused on the language problems of international students who come from countries where English is not commonly taught/learned as the first language. The lack of English language proficiency impacts their experiences, such as cultural adaptation, academic adjustment, and socialization (Andrade, 2006; Chen & Yang, 2014; Gu et al., 2010; Halic et al., 2009; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012; Sawir, 2005; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Schartner, 2015; Tomich, McWhirter, & Darcy, 2003). Most academic problems faced by international students are tied to their English skills, and these difficulties are especially transparent in their speaking and writing (Sawir, 2005). Thus, oral and written English language proficiencies are essential for international students because these students join the U.S. academic community through the avenue of language experience (Halic et al., 2009; Kuo, 2011; Trice, 2003; Xu, 1991).

To gain admission to U.S. colleges and universities, international students are required to complete the international student admission process by obtaining scores in speaking/listening and reading/writing in English that meet the minimum requirements for either the Test of English
as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)\(^1\) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS),\(^2\) as those scores can determine international students’ performance in the English language (Kuo, 2011). However, high scores do not guarantee the students will not experience any challenges in speaking and writing (Kuo, 2011; Xu, 1991). Relevant studies found that TOEFL scores were not indicative of whether students could effectively communicate with their American peers (e.g., Kuo, 2011; Trice, 2003; Xu, 1991).

Some researchers found a positive relationship between English proficiency as measured by the IELTS and the academic performance of international students (Kerstjens & Nery, 2000; Yen & Kuzma, 2009), but other studies found no significant correlation between IELTS scores and grade point average (Feast, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). However, when the relationship between academic performance and IELTS/TOEFL scores was examined by some scholars, the IELTS showed a stronger correlation between scores and performance than the TOEFL did (e.g., Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999).

Since English proficiency, as measured by IELTS or TOEFL, provides an inconclusive picture of international students’ oral and written abilities in English, some researchers have suggested that universities need to look beyond language scores when measuring the academic performance of international students (e.g., Feast, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). Scholars who have explored the relationship between academic performance and TOEFL/IELTS scores argue that

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\(^1\) TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a standardized test (0-120 scores) to measure the English language ability of non-native speakers wishing to enroll in English-speaking universities. Minimum score for U.S. universities is 78 (internet based).

\(^2\) The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is an international standardized test of English language proficiency for non-native English language speakers. It is jointly administered by the British Council, IELTS Australia, and Cambridge Assessment English. The test is scored with a score from band 1 (non-user) to band 9 (expert user). The top ranked universities in the United States tend to require a higher IELTS band (typically 7.0)
regardless of the lower results in language testing, international students can academically succeed if the university provides adequate academic support (Kuo, 2011; Sawir et al., 2012). For this reason, American higher education institutions should create academic support programs that can help international students overcome their language challenges (Kuo, 2011).

However, research on the language problems of international students (e.g. Feast, 2002; Woodrow, 2006) in relation to academic performance does not provide enough information on which aspects of language universities should develop programs to support. To implement adequate programs, the different aspects of language issues among international students should be examined thoroughly, as these difficulties may have a significant impact on academic performance (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004). Although challenges are especially transparent in listening and oral communication, international students struggle in meeting the requirements for academic writing (Gu et al., 2010; Sawir, 2005). Thus, universities should help students master the following language skills: reading, speaking, writing, and comprehension as they impact not only academics but their acculturation process as well (Kuo, 2011; Sawir et al., 2012).

**Acculturation and Cultural Differences**

Most international students experience acculturative stress because they lose connection with their native culture in their struggle to adapt to the host culture (Castro-Abad, 1995; Castro & Rice, 2003; Seyeneh, 2018; Sümer, 2009; Zhou et al., 2008). In this sense, acculturation refers to the process of adjustment to the conditions in the new environment (Castro & Rice, 2003). Sümer (2009) contends that the terms “adaptation” and “adjustment” are used interchangeably in the literature; however, through the lens of acculturation research, adaptation
is commonly understood as an ongoing process of adjusting to the mainstream cultural environment.

For international students, adaptation mainly requires language competence and acquisition of social skills to adjust to the host culture (Zhou et al., 2008). Thus, lack of English proficiency and isolation from their own cultural background can cause many challenges for international students as they try to adapt to their host culture (Sümer, 2009). Some challenges in adapting to the culture include issues such as culture shock, perceived discrimination, and learning new social norms (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhou et al., 2008). Cultural adaptation does not necessarily require international students to accept the norms and values of the new culture; instead, it becomes a learning process for them to be cognizant of the value differences and be prepared to deal with them effectively (Sümer, 2009; Ward, Masgoret, & Gezentsvey, 2009).

Some researchers identify international students as a monolithic group, noting they face difficulty in the process of adapting to life in the U.S. (e.g., Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Other researchers (e.g., Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Zhou et al., 2008) found that when there is a similarity between cultures, the acculturation process might be relatively smooth. However, when there is a cultural distance between the home and host cultures, the process can cause more stress. Investigation of cultural differences in terms of adaptation to the host culture among Asian and European students has demonstrated that the Asian international students felt uncomfortable in communicating with their American peers (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tomich et al., 2003). In contrast, European or South American students did not experience significant challenges communicating with host nationals (Tomich et al., 2003; Zhou et al., 2008).
Social Support

Social support refers to the provision of psychological and material resources to a person in stress (Crockett et al., 2007). When the relationship between the acculturation and acculturative stress of international students is examined, social support should be taken into consideration (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). International students tend to rely heavily on social support as they transition to higher education in the U.S. (Bertram et al., 2014; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Westin, 2007). Thus, social support has been found to be an important factor in helping international students adjust to their new environment (Bai, 2016; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004). Since the most common predictors of international students’ adaptation are associated with English language proficiency, developing social support can be an important factor in reducing acculturative stress (Poyrazli et al., 2004).

International students’ relationships with host nationals can be also an effective social support, as the local people can provide necessary information on local cultural norms (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, finding social support can be a challenge for international students due to language and cultural barriers (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Thus, international students tend to seek support through a network of individuals who share similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Myles & Cheng, 2003; Westin, 2007).

Since international students need social support in their adjustment process, university support programs can help them in this process by making them aware of the requirements and expectations of the host culture (Seyeneh, 2018). This process can be carried out by holding cross-cultural workshops for international students during which they describe the strengths of
their culture and what contributions they make to the host culture (Castro-Abad, 1995). If offered at the university level, social support services can help international students feel connected to the campus culture and develop feelings of belongingness and acceptance (Seyeneh, 2018).

**Academic Challenges and Socialization**

Researchers explored academic challenges that international students face when adjusting to U.S. higher education due to the differences in higher education systems between their home countries and those of the U.S. (e.g., Kuo, 2011; Yi, Lin, Jenny, & Kishimoto, 2003). Studies also found that international students experience challenges, particularly in student–faculty interactions due to the lack of language skills (e.g., Zhao et al., 2005; Zhou et al., 2008). Instructors tend to question the academic skills of international students, and they perceive their limited participation in class as a lack of critical thinking skills (Lin & Scherz, 2014).

In contrast, international students report that their lack of involvement in class discussions is due to weakness in language (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). International students may also form negative opinions about instructors for their use of rapid speech and perceived indifference to international students’ challenges (Robertson et al., 2000). Thus, when international students need to seek assistance from professors, the students often think the faculty might have a negative impression about their academic ability (Andrade, 2006; Valdez, 2015). When international students receive adequate support from faculty, it can help them succeed academically (Andrade, 2006; Lent, Singley, Shaue, Schmidt, & Schmidt, 2007; Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007).

The academic challenges that international students confront in U.S. higher education institutions are also associated with academic expectations that are different from their own
cultures (Yan & Berliner, 2011). In addition to academic challenges, international students tended to report higher levels of perceived discrimination, particularly those who lacked English proficiency, as noted by Beoku-Betts (2004), Lee and Rice (2007), and Poyrazli and Lopez (2007). The perceived discrimination may negatively impact their academic adjustment and academic performance (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Wu et al., 2015).

Therefore, academic socialization is vital for international students to avoid the feelings associated with perceived discrimination (Wu et al., 2015). Academic socialization refers to a student’s understanding of the expectations of academic culture (Duff, 2010). Socialization into academic discourse takes places through faculty and peer interactions both inside and outside of classroom settings (Reinhardt & Chen, 2013). International students who interacted with American peers were generally more satisfied with their academic experiences at their respective institutions (Hofstede, 2001; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). When international students socialized outside the classroom and communicated with other members of the academic environment, their experience transferred to their in-class performance (Andrew, 2011; Reinhardt & Chen, 2013). Such socialization experiences offered opportunities to learn about using language and increased their knowledge of lexical repertoires (Andrew, 2011). Thus, in the context of international students, the intersections through their in-class and out-of-class experiences can inform a broader understanding of socialization into academic discourse (Andrew, 2011).

Literature pertinent to language skills, acculturation, social support, and academic challenges and socialization demonstrate that the lack of English language proficiency was the underlying factor of the challenges faced by international students whose native language was not English. International students try to cope with different challenges and try to make use of
resources both on and off campus. On campus, international students try to interact with instructors and with their peers, and off campus they try to seek social support from members of the host culture. However, as research demonstrates (e.g., Banjong, 2015; Sherry et al., 2010), if international students make good use of resources on campus, such as the writing center, they may be able to overcome English language barriers and receive the support they need. If the students benefit from tutoring sessions, this experience can positively impact their academic performance. However, the relevant literature that discussed challenges faced by international students did not make a great distinction between international undergraduate and graduate students. As the current study focused specifically on international doctoral students, the next section details the challenges specific to international graduate students.

**International Graduate Students’ Experiences**

Graduate students, particularly international graduate students, experience more challenges than undergraduate students (e.g., lack of connection to campus, academic socialization in their departments). Multiple studies have examined international graduate students’ academic experiences (e.g. Colombo, 2011; Gajdzik, 2005; Kuo, 2011; Lent et al., 2007; Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Perucci & Hu, 1995; Zhao et al., 2007). International graduate students may face the same problems as American graduate students; in other words, they must deal with the academic pressures of graduate school as well as financial problems and relationships with faculty and peers (Kuo, 2011). However, international graduate students’ problems are coupled with pursuing graduate studies while functioning in a foreign language (Perucci & Hu, 1995). In addition, some of the students bring their families with them, causing
more isolation from the academic environment as they have to spend time with their families (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

International graduate students’ interactions in the academic culture, especially with their professors in their respective disciplinary programs, are important because the faculty provide the students with access to the academic research culture (Colombo, 2011; Deem & Brehony, 2000). By collaborating with their professors in their programs, international graduate students gain experience in teaching, research, and publishing practices in their own disciplinary fields (Colombo, 2011). However, research suggests access to research activity is comparatively easier for students enrolled in graduate science programs than for those in non-science programs (Deem & Brehony, 2000).

Studies also found that the relationship between the advisor and advisee plays a central role in international graduate students’ academic satisfaction (Colombo, 2011; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001; Zhao et al., 2007). International graduate students expect psychosocial assistance, such as empathy and/or role modeling, from advisors. Thus, in selecting their advisors, international doctoral students tend to pay attention to their advisors’ background characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity and education (Zhao et al., 2007). To be productive in teaching or writing, international graduate students expect more help and collaboration from their advisors in the form of academic mentorship (Colombo, 2011; Kuo, 2011). In addition to struggling to form connections with professorial staff and advisors, international graduate students face challenges in meeting the demands of course assignments, candidacy examinations, and theses/dissertations that largely shape the academic experience of graduate students in any discipline (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Colombo, 2011).
One of the greatest parts of academic tasks is written communication at the graduate level (Colombo, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Sharma, 2018). Support programs that involve writing can serve as a means for helping international graduate students navigate the U.S. academic culture as well as a way of developing their own identity in their respective academic disciplines and of pursuing their academic and professional goals (Sharma, 2018). However, many U.S. universities do not provide formal or systematic training in academic writing for international doctoral students (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Colombo, 2011; Lambie, Hayes, Griffith, Limberg, & Mullen, 2014; Sharma, 2018).

Writing Centers

Although there are studies focused on American graduate students’ experiences with writing centers (Gard, 2017; Prior, 1998; Swales & Feak, 2004), only a few studies examined the role of the writing center in international graduate students’ academic pursuits (Phillips, 2013; Thonus, 2004). In this section, I will first examine writing center pedagogy and briefly discuss the tutoring process and conclude with a review of literature pertinent to international students’ experiences with writing centers.

Writing Center Pedagogy

First established in the United States in the 1930s, writing centers have an extensive historical background that supports their current practices (Boquet, 1999; Bruffee, 1984; Chang, 2011; Denny, Messina, & Reich, 2015; Mazen, 2018; North, 1984). Historically, writing centers have provided academic support for students who needed some assistance with writing papers, and for this reason, writing centers were referred to as writing labs or writing clinics (Chang,
Writing centers acquired their current roles and names as centers due to the open-admissions era when universities started to lower their admission standards to recruit larger numbers of educationally diverse students (Boquet, 1999). Most U.S. colleges have writing centers that use the walk-in style where students can get assistance with writing related to their academic assignments without making formal appointments (Denny et al., 2015). Thus, the writing center is perceived as a student-focused environment (Bruffee, 1984; North, 1984).

Writing centers subscribe to a variety of different pedagogies to address students’ writing concerns (North, 1984; Plummer & Thonus, 1999; Thonus, 2004). Commonly practiced pedagogy at writing centers assumes that students can articulate their ideas and reply to questions about their writing for a good exchange of information (Thonus, 2004). Therefore, through a dialogic approach, writing centers advocate for tutoring methods to improve social interactions between tutors and tutees (Plummer & Thonus, 1999; Woolbright, 1992). However, this approach assigns a more authoritative role to the tutor; instead, writing center pedagogy should incorporate cooperative and nonhierarchical interactions between tutors and students (Woolbright, 1992).

When it comes to adopting new writing center pedagogy when working with ESL students, it is essential to consider that learning and writing are “essentially social acts and that conversation and collaboration are essential elements to promote critical thinking and good writing” (Gillespie & Lerner, 2008, p. 147). Therefore, North’s article, “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984), was a turning point for adopting a new pedagogy for writing centers (Boquet & Lerner, 2008). Criticizing traditional pedagogies that encourage a nondirective approach when working with ESL students, North proposed creating pedagogy for writing centers that aimed to produce better writing, stressing the fact that the writers themselves should be changed, not their
writing (Boquet & Lerner, 2008). As a result, most writing centers adopted North’s ideas about the writing center as a place for producing better writers and proposed a collaborative style (Boquet & Lerner, 2008; Thonus, 2004) or feminist style of mentoring, such as collaboration that promotes effective conversation, as it enables learning through the tutoring experience (Nicolas, 2002; Woolbright, 1992).

During effective tutoring, students not only learn from social and tutorial interactions, but they can also develop their identities as emerging scholars in their disciplines (Ede, 1989; Mazen, 2018). Thus, social and tutorial interactions play a major role in writing learning (Davis, 2006; Ede, 1989). For this reason, when interacting with students, tutors should aspire to instill self-confidence and help the students to become better writers through effective feedback (Davis, 2006; Mazen, 2018). In the writing center pedagogy, effectiveness is defined as the satisfaction of the students with the writing assistance they get (Weigle & Nelson, 2004). When international students get effective feedback that enhances their learning, they describe the sessions as effective (Mazen, 2018).

Writing center scholarship generally focuses on either the tutoring process or writing center pedagogies; however, the literature pertinent to international students’ experiences with writing centers is limited. The next section will look at some literature that discusses international students’ experiences with writing centers.

Writing Centers and International Students

With the increase of international students in U.S. universities, this student population has become central to writing-related conversations, as they often have limited knowledge of academic writing in English (Thonus, 2004). International students have various language skills,
communication abilities, and educational backgrounds (Seror, 2011), so they experience different levels of difficulty in writing (Okuda & Anderson, 2018).

International students whose first language is not English frequently visit the writing center at U.S. higher education institutions (Hirschhorn, 2007; Mazen, 2018; Raimes, 1985). However, due to their low proficiency in English, ESL students’ expectations of the tutors are different than native speakers of English (Mazen, 2018). These students need “more of everything: more time, more opportunity to talk, listen, read, and write in order to marshal the vocabulary they need to make their own background knowledge accessible to them in their L2” (Raimes, 1985, p. 55). For these reasons, they visit writing centers to overcome challenges writing in English (Hirschhorn, 2007; Mazen, 2018).

Thus, writing centers are places for international students to learn the intricacies of academic writing and practice their communication skills (Sharma, 2018; Terui, 2012). Through dialogues about the ideas related to their writing, international students can obtain the required assistance for their writing projects and academically socialize (Terui, 2012). Tutors and tutees can engage in educational, political, social and other dialogues (North, 1994). However, due to some writing center pedagogies, such as nondirective tutoring, international students face some contradictions in the tutoring process (Kim, 2018).

Interaction and participation of some international students in the tutoring process can be significantly limited due to their proficiency in academic language (Blau & Hall, 2002; Terui, 2012). If the tutors are aware of some of these limitations, they can help international students become more proficient and confident in written and oral communication (Kim, 2018). In some cases, the language and cultural differences of international students can create a tension between the tutor and tutee in the interaction process (Kim, 2018). However, if tutees can establish a good
relationship with the tutors, both the tutor and tutee can begin to engage in a dialogue, making the international students’ experiences at a writing center positive (Geller et al., 2007).

While some international students use the writing center to fulfill a course requirement or a professor’s expectation, most of them find the writing center helpful in dealing with the isolation, as the interactions provide opportunities to share their ideas with the peer tutors (Okuda & Anderson, 2017). International students also view tutors as cultural informants and expect them to explain cultural traditions or practices; the expectations of American rhetoric and academic culture can also be regraded cultural information (Cogie, 2006). Thus, writing centers have been found to not only improve international students’ writing skills but also help them participate in academic discourse and socialize with their peers (Colombo, 2011). Writing centers can serve as a key to the academic socialization of international students if there is a positive social interaction between the tutor and tutee (Okuda & Anderson, 2017). In addition, writing centers can be helpful in international graduate students’ adjustment to the academic community (Canagarajah, 2002; Cogie, 2006; Colombo, 2011).

In sum, writing centers are evolving due to the changing demographics of the student population, and they are adopting strategies to meet their student population’s needs, including international students’ needs (Rafoth, 2015). However, international graduate students still remain an under-researched population in writing center scholarship (Phillips, 2013). In other words, little research is directed at finding out how writing centers shape international graduate students’ academic experiences.
Conceptual Framework

Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) principle and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory are the theoretical frameworks that guided my study (see Appendix A). This study viewed language learning, particularly academic writing, as a fundamentally social, cultural, and temporal activity. Thus, the study drew from sociocultural and situated learning theories. I first discuss Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD and then explain Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory. I also address how adding this second theory strengthened the study.

Sociocultural theory emerged from the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Mazen, 2018). After extensively studying children’s behaviors, Vygotsky (1978) concluded that children can learn if they get help from others who have more experience. To describe this process of learning, Vygotsky (1978) coined the term ZPD to explain how the learning process happens through collaborative interactions between novices and more capable peers. In the context of the adult population, ZPD is helpful for analyzing how peers’ support contributes to individual learning (Shaffer, 2000). In the context of writing centers, ZPD is ascribed to situations in which learners are actively involved in a supportive dialogue where they practice different levels of learning until they reach higher levels of performance (Mazen, 2018).

When practiced through the scaffolding approach, Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD principle helps language learners understand the proper use of certain language, and, for this reason, the concept is frequently discussed in writing center literature (Mazen, 2018). Thus, the sociocultural theory provides a rationale for studying the social interactions of international graduate students with their tutors within a writing center context.
Similar to Vygotsky, Lave and Wenger (1991) also highlight the central role of social interactions in the academic practices through their situated learning theory and its associated concept, legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Situated learning is a theoretical concept that underscores knowledge as a socially embedded process that can be better internalized by learners’ participation in activities in which experienced learners share their knowledge with newcomers (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Through LPP, newcomers start participating in a legitimate way in the community of practice (CoP), fulfilling activities that are peripheral to enhance learning (Colombo, 2011). In CoP, experts and expertise are at the center of a community of practice because new learners stay on the periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Legitimate peripheral participation is closely linked with the concept of community of practice (Colombo, 2011) because existing knowledge is gradually transferred by experts to learners in the periphery by providing support for learning through social interactions (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In the context of international graduate students, by participating in tutoring sessions and exploring the academic rhetoric, they gradually move to the center of the academic community. LPP allows conceptualizing learning as the development of a sense of identity and changing this identity over the course of time (Colombo, 2011). LPP helps explain change of identities in international doctoral students who visit writing centers frequently.

Expanding on their LPP concept, Lave and Wenger (1991) focus specifically on communities of practice (CoP) by proposing that learning, as a social activity, is situated not in the individual but in processes of participation in academic life. Community of practice is defined as a group of people who share experiences by interacting with each other on a regular basis (Lave & Wenger, 1991). LPP helps understand how new members join a CoP by doing
tasks there and learning the common goals of community, developing the learner’s identity (Colombo, 2011). By joining the CoP, the newcomers learn the common repertoire of knowledge and language and develop mutual interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Joining to a Western academic community is not an easy task because it tends to marginalize English as a second of language (ESL) students (Canagarajah, 2002). By participating in the academic community as a peripheral participant, the learners gradually move to the center of the community (Colombo, 2011). By learning, they become a new person and develop a sense of new identity, demonstrating that they evolve in their membership roles in the CoP (Colombo, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning and CoP provide a picture of how international doctoral students can be socialized into their academic disciplines through interactions related to developing their scholarly writing (Li, 2007). To be more specific, in the context of writing centers, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theoretical tenets can help explain the international graduate students’ engagement with the tutors and their efforts to accept or resist the expectations of academic writing in the U.S. (Colombo, 2011). In this complex process of socializing through academic discourse at writing centers, international graduate students evolve as scholars while completing their graduate-level tasks (Mazen, 2018). Thus, international graduate students’ academic socialization in CoP through writing centers becomes not just a simple process of acquiring predetermined standards of academic writing but turns into a complex process of developing and changing identities within the CoP (Li, 2007; Morita, 2004).

Simply, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) postulations on situated learning help explain how international graduate students gradually come to realize the importance of knowledge shared among community members by visiting writing centers. Lave and Wenger’s contention parallels
Ramsay, Jones, and Barker’s (2007) in that learning follows contextual and cultural situations against the traditional cognitive paradigm. This theory poses a challenge to conceptualizing learning as a strictly individual process of internalizing knowledge (Prior, 1998). From this point of view, knowledge acquisition happens through students’ intellectual ability to learn more to relate to the environment by following others’ paths. In other words, situated learning in CoP as well as the participants’ ZPD through scaffolded feedback helped examine how the interactions of international graduate students with tutors at the writing center affected their academic experiences at one American higher education institution.

Chapter Summary

Literature focused on international students has demonstrated the importance of both social relationships and language competence for their academic success. To cope with academic challenges, international graduate students may seek support from writing centers. Writing center pedagogies that promote collaborative learning can be helpful for international graduate students to succeed academically while shaping their academic experiences. However, still little research has examined how the interactions in writing centers can shape international students’ academic experiences.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on the methodology for the current study. It also presents the
research questions and the researcher’s positionality as well as the research design, participant
selection criteria, data collection, data analysis procedures, and trustworthiness of the study.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the Writing Center at a public
university in the Midwest (PUM) shapes the academic experiences of international doctoral
students through socialization with the writing tutors. The following research questions guided
this study:

1. How do international doctoral students describe their interaction with the writing
center tutors?
2. How does the writing center contribute to international doctoral students’ academic
experience?

Researcher’s Positionality Statement

Prior to explaining the methodology of my study, it is important to reflect on my
worldview and my past experiences related to the research topic. Since this was a qualitative
study, I was the main instrument of data collection (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). Therefore, I start
by explaining my worldview and then share how my personal experiences impacted my stance as a researcher and how that stance influenced my research design.

**My Worldview**

My worldview is informed by the constructivist paradigm as well as by feminist perspectives. The epistemology of constructivism is associated with the theories of postmodernism and poststructuralism (Creswell, 2014). Postmodernism focuses on the experiences of each individual and aims at exploring multiple truths of personal construction; on the other hand, poststructuralism considers knowledge to be an unstable social construct and accepts the possibility of plural truths (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Driven by postmodernist and poststructuralist principles, constructivism underscores that reality is socially constructed, and constructivists seek to understand how individuals develop their own thoughts about an environment (Creswell, 2013). Those individual thoughts are socially constructed, meaning that knowledge is developed through human interactions and individuals’ interpretations of those interactions (Creswell, 2013).

Congruent with Creswell’s (2013) idea on how reality is constructed through human interactions, I was interested in exploring the social interactions between international doctoral students and their tutors and the impact of the interactions on these students’ experiences. Thus, as a researcher, I kept in mind the cultural and individual differences of the participants, as those differences, being indicative of the constructivist paradigm, highlighted the uniqueness of each individual’s thoughts (Hesse-Biber, 2013). My constructivist worldview influenced my choice of the qualitative case study method because this method helped me explore the unique perspectives of international doctoral students about their interactions with tutors in depth.
My worldview is also influenced by feminist perspectives. Feminist researchers strive to help others by giving “voice to their experiences” (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 40). Foss and Foss posit that feminist researchers should constantly monitor their own perspectives regarding their personal experiences by making every effort to develop skills that allow a researcher to facilitate and honor the emergence of individual perspectives. As a result, the research becomes “a joint construction of the participants’ experiences and interpretations and researchers’ presentational expertise” (p. 41). Consistent with this statement, I monitored my own perspective through ongoing reflections on my positionality as the researcher, member checking, and peer reviews.

**Researcher’s Background**

My background also influenced my approach to this research. First, I am currently an international graduate student pursuing a doctoral degree; thus, I have personal insights into the challenges of international doctoral students in adjusting to the academic climate in the U.S. Since my identity as an international student gave me an insider perspective, I anticipated that I would not face significant challenges in establishing relationships with my potential participants. My anticipation was proven right, as I did not face any significant challenges in establishing rapport with my participants before starting the interviews.

There were also advantages of being an insider to the population I was studying, such as familiarity with the tutoring process and the dynamics of tutor and tutee relationships. However, the role of insider-researcher can lead to some problems; for example, the researcher may not be objective and may make assumptions, perhaps wrong, driven by prior knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Indeed, I found myself making assumptions in doing observations at the Writing Center, but I tried to neutralize my perspective by being constantly engaged in memoing/reflecting on
my role as a researcher. While as a researcher-insider it was not possible to completely eliminate all my assumptions, I think that having my own perspective on tutor and tutee relationships contributes to the research. Any educational research aims to study the uniqueness of individual experiences, each of which brings different perspectives to the research process, including the researcher’s own perspective (Porteli, 2008; Unluer, 2012). A researcher’s own perspective can produce a more objective account of the research process (Porteli, 2008). However, insider-researchers must always be aware of the possible effects of perceived bias on data collection and analysis and should follow the ethical procedures related to the protection of confidentiality of the individual participants at each and every stage of the research (Unluer, 2012). Consistent with the Unluer’s (2012) assertions, I followed the ethical procedures in conducting this qualitative research.

Second, my tutoring job at the Center was also beneficial for recruiting potential participants because the director of the Writing Center provided access to the Writing Center database to select participants who met the criteria. My job as a tutor at the research site had earned me some level of trust among the targeted population, which encouraged at least 10 participants to respond to my invitation for the interview. However, five international doctoral students did not respond to the invitation, and when I asked some of them why they declined to participate, they said that they were hesitant to share their experiences because of my position as a tutor. Later, by providing more detailed information about my study, I was able to earn the trust of four additional international doctoral students by assuring them that I was going to interpret and accurately express their responses while maintaining confidentiality (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003).
Research Design

I used a qualitative case study design to explore how the Writing Center at PUM shaped international doctoral students’ academic experiences through interactions with the tutors. Case study is defined as a methodology that involves “intensive description and analysis of a single unit or bound system such as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Through a case study, the researcher can understand both the process and the outcome of a phenomenon through a series of observations and close examination of the case (Yin, 2003). A case study design should be applied when a) a study aims to answer “how” questions, b) the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clear, and/or c) a researcher cannot control the behavior of those involved in the study (Yin, 2003). Therefore, a case study approach fit the current study because I had a clearly defined bounded system: the Writing Center. The phenomenon investigated within the case was the international doctoral students’ perceptions of their interactions with tutors and their experiences with the Writing Center at PUM.

Since a case study encourages the use of multiple methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the case (Huberman & Miles, 2002), I used several forms of data collection (interviews, observations, and artifact analysis) to examine the role of the Writing Center in international doctoral students’ academic experiences. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assert, interviews may be used in two different ways in qualitative research; they can be either a dominant strategy for data collection or they can be utilized together with participant observation, document analysis, and other techniques. I used the interviews as the primary source
of data. Observations and document analysis were additional sources of data, which allowed me to triangulate the findings and develop a more in-depth picture of my case (Creswell, 2013).

Case: Writing Center at PUM

Prior to describing the case, a brief description of PUM is essential to contextualize the demographics of its international students. Although situated in a rural area, PUM welcomes students from many different ethnicities, and as the mission states, the university “celebrates diversity in all its forms including gender, race, ethnicity, ability, spirituality, sexuality, age and all individual identities.” The total student enrollment as of Fall 2019 was 16,609: 12,131 undergraduate and 4,204 graduate students. The 822 international students were from 102 different countries, and 605 of them were graduate students, 156 of them being doctoral students (PUM, 2019). International graduate students make up 73% of the international student population and 14.3% of the graduate student population at PUM.

The case I investigated was the Writing Center at PUM. The case was bound by its location, the Writing Center at PUM, as well as time because my study was conducted during the Spring 2020 semester. Table 1 shows the number of international students, most of whom are international graduate students, based on information from the Writing Center’s database. In the 2018-2019 academic year, 35% of the Writing Center clients were international graduate students, making up the 60% of the graduate sessions that were held at the Center. In 2019-2020 academic year, 42% of the clients were international graduate students, making up 55% of the graduate sessions.
Graduate students seek support from the Writing Center because writing is an integral part of their graduate studies (Gard, 2017). Working as a tutor, I observed many international doctoral students scheduling recurring appointments and I wanted to know their motivation for their frequent visits to the Center.

Data Collection Process

I started talking to the director of the Writing Center in the fall of 2019 about conducting the study in the spring of 2020. She granted her initial permission to conduct the study after I sought and received IRB approval. I received IRB approval in late December of 2019. I started the data collection in mid-January of 2020. However, I faced some challenges during data collection because the campus was closed in mid-March due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Namely, I could not conduct observations because students were attending online tutoring sessions. I could not do in-person interviews due to social distancing imposed by regulations of health organizations.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>Overall graduate sessions</th>
<th>Individual clients</th>
<th>International graduate students</th>
<th>Individual clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>5,562</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>3,357</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020</td>
<td>4,532</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>2,506</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment Strategies and Participant Demographics

I planned to select 15 participants through purposeful sampling. Merriam (2009) notes that the goal of purposeful sampling is to maximize information to reach saturation. Initially, I tried to choose the participants who met the following criteria: a) international doctoral student, b) at PUM for at least one year, and c) had scheduled appointments at the Writing Center at least three times during the Fall 2019 semester. Approximately 30 students met all three criteria; however, 12 of them were ineligible to participate in my study because I worked with them as a tutor on a regular basis. To obtain the best possible accurate data, I did not want to recruit anyone with whom I worked on a constant basis, as I was concerned that they might not be comfortable telling the truth about their opinions or experiences with the Writing Center.

Prior to sending the invitation emails to 15 eligible students, I posted invitation flyers for the interviews on the door of the Writing Center starting in late January of 2020 (see Appendix B). My contact information was on the flyer in case any international doctoral students displayed an interest for an interview. I shared the information about the incentive (a $20 Target gift card) for each person participating in the interview on the flyer. The flyer was posted for two weeks. During that period, I did not attract any responses to the invitation, and for this reason, with permission of the Writing Center director, I selected the names of the participants from the Writing Center’s database. I sent email invitations to 15 students (see Appendix C) whom I identified as potential participants, asking them to participate in the interview. Only 10 students responded to the email invitation. Since I needed to recruit five additional students, I contacted PUM’s Division of Enrollment Management, Marketing and Communications to send a mass email to all 155 international doctoral students (see Figure 1).
Even after sending the official email to recruit more participants, only three more students responded. Those students did not meet the third criterion because as doctoral students they had not scheduled any tutoring sessions in Fall of 2019. Instead, they scheduled many sessions in spring or summer of 2019. Still, I decided to interview them as their insight about their experiences with the Writing Center would be invaluable for this study. As I needed at least two more participants, I asked my international friends to help me recruit participants for my study. By employing this strategy, I was able to recruit four additional students who met all three criteria. Thus, I interviewed 17 students in total. Table 2 presents the participants’ demographic information.
Interviews

The 17 interviews took place from January 15 to May 7 of 2020. The participants chose any time during that period. Therefore, I arranged my schedule to do the observations and conduct interviews. Due to the campus closure in mid-March, I had to conduct four interviews online using platforms such as Zoom, Skype and Teams.

I communicated via email with each participant to set the date, time, and location for the interview; the consent form was attached to the invitation email so the participants could review it and learn more about the study (Appendix D). The consent form included the agreement to participate in the interviews and two observations (one before and one after the interview). Participants either brought the signed consent forms to the interviews or emailed me confirming their agreement to participate in the study.

Interviews were conducted in places in which the participants felt comfortable. Creswell (2013) notes the importance of selecting a location in which participants are most at ease, as it will contribute to a more natural interview process and create a trustful atmosphere. Most of the interviews took place either at the library and/or in the College of Education building.

Prior to starting the interviews, I asked students whether they still agreed to participate and to be audio-recorded. Once they confirmed their consent, I asked them to sign in the designated space on the consent form. Using a digital recording device helped me maintain eye contact with the participants and focus on their responses. Each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes. Semi-structured interview questions sought answers to questions related to the participants’ interactions with the tutors at the Writing Center (see Appendix E).
Table 2

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Country of origin/Native language</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Holds master’s degree from U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>Bangladesh/Bangla</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>Iraq/Arabic</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Instructional Technology</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annisa</td>
<td>Indonesia/Indonesian</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Instructional Technology</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td>Ecuador/Spanish</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayesha</td>
<td>Pakistan/Urdu</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Curriculum and Leadership</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bao</td>
<td>China/Mandarin</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farhad</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia/Arabic</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Instructional Technology</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Taiwan/Mandarin</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Art Education</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lian</td>
<td>China/Mandarin</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Instructional Technology</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Colombia/Spanish</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mehreen</td>
<td>Pakistan/Urdu</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Curriculum and Leadership</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohamed</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia/Arabic</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Instructional Technology</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabia</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia/Arabic</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Educational Psychology</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raj</td>
<td>India/Bengali</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Instructional Technology</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>Brazil/Portuguese</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song</td>
<td>South Korea/Korean</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valeria</td>
<td>Uruguay/Spanish</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interview questions were open ended and phrased in a way to encourage participants to elaborate in depth on points they wanted to make. The initial questions were easy to answer to establish rapport with the participants, and then I moved to the ones that were more complex or personal in nature (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The questions sought answers about their general experiences with the Center, such as their best sessions or the sessions that were not effective from the perspective of the participants. I asked some follow-up or probing questions when the participants’ responses were ambiguous or needed more clarification. As data collection lasted longer than I initially planned (January to April 2020), the interview transcripts were prepared by the end of July 2020.

Observations

The purpose of observations was to explore how the international doctoral students interacted with the tutors at the Writing Center of PUM. However, due to the outbreak of the pandemic, I could not complete all 30 observations I had initially planned. The Writing Center was closed on March 16 due to COVID-19, and before that time I could finish only 15 observations. Specifically, I accomplished 11 observations with 11 students before interviewing them and only four post-interview observations of those students. During the observations, I did not intervene with tutoring because I did not want to make my participants uncomfortable. Thus, my observations were direct, nonparticipatory, and nonobtrusive, which helped me avoid any bias (Baker, 2006). Tutors also signed the consent form before the observations (see Appendix F).

During the observations, I primarily focused on the international doctoral students’ demeanor when they interacted with the tutors by paying particular attention to body language
and other forms of demeanor, such as nervousness (see Appendix G). The pre-interview observations with 11 students helped me ask more questions during the subsequent interviews with them. For example, referring to my observational notes, I asked those students to explain some of their demeanor or behavior that needed clarification. Thus, through observations I gained additional insight into the relationships between the tutors and tutees.

Artifacts

In addition to the interviews and observations, I collected artifacts from the Writing Center, which included, but were not limited to, the Center’s database, blogs by novice tutors, tutor training modules, and readings on ESL students at the Writing Center, which were part of tutor training. The Writing Center database was reviewed to identify potential participants’ names. These data also supported that the international doctoral students had recurring appointments with the tutors they preferred to work with on a frequent basis. I analyzed the Writing Center coaches’ blog to find data to support the themes or subthemes from the interviews and/or observations. I found a section in which the novice tutors had some readings about working with ESL students at writing centers and shared what they had learned from the readings as well as their future tutoring strategies. The training modules introduced new coaches to the Writing Center policy teaching them how to work with ESL students (e.g., cultural differences that inform ESL students’ writing patterns and their limited vocabulary that hinders them from articulating their needs). The tutor training materials were reviewed to identify how tutors were trained to work with international or ESL students. Review of the training materials showed that working with ESL students tends to be a frequent topic during tutor training sessions.
Data Analysis

Prior to analyzing the data, I first transferred the audio files of the interview recordings and any scanned notes I made during observations into my password-protected computer. The hard copies of consent forms and notes were placed in a locked file drawer in my apartment. To analyze qualitative data, this study followed the strategies offered by Creswell (2013): a) transcribing interviews, b) coding the textual data of the interviews and other forms of data, c) identifying themes and reporting emerging themes to display findings into a sequence, and d) interpreting the findings of the study.

To transcribe the interviews, I used rev.com, a web-based transcription service that captures audible English speech in an audio file. I uploaded the audio files into rev.com and selected the automated transcription service ($0.25 per minute). The automated transcriptions were ready in 5-15 minutes, depending on the lengths of the interviews. However, the transcriptions were not 100% accurate. For this reason, I edited the files with the built-in editing features of the website because the website produced interactive versions of the transcripts. To do this, I went through each transcript, listened to the transcript, and read them line by line to correct the sections that were transcribed inaccurately.

After editing the files in the website, I saved each transcript in a Word document. Then I read the transcripts multiple times for accuracy. After reading the interviews, I imported the transcriptions of interviews and observational notes into MAXQDA-2020 software to organize and code the data. MAXQDA is a qualitative data analysis software developed by researchers. This software was useful for storing the transcripts and observational notes and for coding the data. I used open coding to identify the phrases that directly or indirectly related to the research
questions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Open coding strategy helped me identify the ideas related to the research questions and/or conceptual framework. Without having predefined codes, I let the ideas emerge from the existing data (Creswell, 2013). I focused on concepts related to particular experiences, perspectives, and/or explanations and viewpoints (Seidman, 2006). MAXQDA software helped me assign different colors to each code (see the left screen of Figure 2).

Figure 2: Coding sample.

After the first round of coding, I had reviewed the 153 codes obtained from the data. The second round of the coding process involved extracting themes from the data, comparing themes from one data type (interviews) to another (observations) and across participants (Baralt, 2012). Then I started to identify potential themes. Emergent themes helped me establish connections
among the data items and categorize similar perspectives as well as compare and contrast contradictory responses (Saldaña, 2015).

I added some subthemes to each theme with a representative code(s), and significant quotes related to theme were highlighted. For instance, if the interviewees emphasized the tutors’ feedback that supported them in understanding U.S. academic writing, such as scaffolding, this subtheme was coded as zone of proximal development and relevant quotes were pulled from the transcript. After analyzing and coding the interview transcripts and observations, I compared the codes to see if similar themes were reflected in these data collection methods.

To accurately represent my participants’ experiences, specifically the data regarding the first research question, I decided to use another software, Knowledge Building Discourse eXplorer (KBDeX) designed for discourse analysis, as it helped me focus on each participant’s spoken words (Matsuzawa et al., 2011; Oshima et al., 2012). KBDeX software is an effective tool for analyzing knowledge-building discourse, as it builds on knowledge-building pedagogy (Matsuzawa et al., 2011) and creates network structures based on the bipartite graph of words × discourse units (Oshima et al., 2012). The software categorizes those structures into three types: 1) students, 2) discourse units, and 3) selected words (see Figure 3).

When analyzing the data, KBDeX went through each discourse unit to check co-occurrence of words by creating networks of discourse units and words based on the participants’ words, which served as the domain vocabulary. Specifically, the software detected the keywords that reflected the participants’ perceptions of the feedback provided during tutoring sessions, showing the characteristics of interaction levels among the keywords. For example, in the analysis process, if two terms co-occurred in discourse structure, KBDeX drew a connection between them; similarly, if two or more learners used a similar word, a visible link was drawn.
between them as well. The stronger the connection among the students, units and words, the thicker the lines drawn among them.

Figure 3. KBDeX graphical user interface.

As seen in Figure 3, the main view of the KBDeX graphical user interface has four windows: 1) a discourse viewer showing the selected words marked in red on the screen (top left), 2) the network structure of learners (top right), c) the network structure of discourse units (bottom left), and d) the network structure of selected words (bottom right). Although I could select any layout algorithm for the three network structures, I preferred using a circular layout for only the networks of discourse units (see Figure 4), as this algorithm is used in the software by
default. For other two structures, the network of learners and words (see top right and bottom right windows of Figure 4), I used the Fruchterman-Reingold layout to demonstrate the network structure of the learners and the links among the words. In this layout algorithm, the nodes are represented by steel rings and the edges are represented by springs. On this structure, I could also see that some learners were pulled together, whereas three learners (Annisa, Mehreen and Mohamed) were pushed further apart from the main structure. Similarly, the phrases/words of three of the learners were pushed far from the main structure of the network (see Figure 5).

Therefore, I closed the other two windows and enlarged the text of the students’ and words’ network structures to see which words/phrases those students used (see Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4. Networks of learners.
By visually and interactively exploring these two types of networks (network of learners and network of selected words), I could see the relationships among the students from very specific angles. For instance, by looking at the learner network (see Figure 4), I could see which students were using terms or phrases similar to other students and which ones were more isolated from the main structure in terms of their conversation content. By checking the network of tracked words (see Figure 5), I saw the codes in the primary structure yielded significant insights about the discourse content. To be more specific, I identified the words and phrases that suggested scaffolded feedback in a zone of proximal development. For example, almost all students used words such as suggested, recommended, provided, discussed, etc., all of which attested to the fact that students perceived their interaction with their tutors as a knowledge-building process. The cluster of words on the left side of the window (see Figure 5) clearly
indicate that tutorial interactions were friendly, and they benefitted from tutoring sessions. For example, there are connections between “write” and “better,” also “feel and “friendly.”

Although two of the three students, who were out of the structure, made positive comments about their interactions with tutors (see Figure 3), the third student (Mohamed) provided somewhat negative comments about the discourse that occurred between him and the tutor. In sum, this analysis helped me see on how the students described their construction of knowledge through their interactions with their tutors during sessions. By engaging in knowledge-building discourse, the students exchanged their ideas through collaborative discourse.

Once I completed analyzing the data from interviews and observations, I analyzed the artifacts to find themes that either support or contradict data from interviews and observations. Thus, I developed a detailed description of the case, the Writing Center at PUM, and a strong theoretical understanding of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

To improve the trustworthiness of my findings, I utilized triangulation, member checking, peer examination, and clarification of the researcher’s positionality (Merriam, 1998). According to Mathison (1988), triangulation among the data sources helps construct “plausible explanations about the phenomena being studied” (as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 204). I used the data from observations and artifacts to strengthen the findings based on the interviews.

Member checking is important to accurately reflect participants’ experiences and stories (Carlson, 2010). To make sure I have accurate reflections of the students’ experiences, I asked students to verify the accuracy of interview transcripts. I emailed the transcripts to the
participants in early July, asking them to edit the sections because I could not comprehend some parts due to the poor quality of recording (especially in the online interviews). By mid-August, 12 students responded to my email confirming the accuracy of the transcriptions. The other five students did not respond at all. Not answering the email was their way of opting out of member checking (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, I decided to proceed with the responses they provided in the interviews. I edited unclear sections to the best of my knowledge. Additionally, I shared with them the recommendations for improving services for international doctoral students. In late October, I sent emails to all 17 participants by sharing recommendations for improving the Writing Center services for international doctoral students. I did not share the emergent themes from interviews, as they needed some revisions. Of the 17 students, only four students responded by late November, adding some information to the recommendations list that I sent to them. This process ensured that I was accurately reflecting my participants’ recommendations in my own recommendations to the Writing Center.

When taking dissertation-related classes, I benefitted from the faculty and peer feedback they provided for my dissertation chapters. During the data analysis process, I also worked with tutors and my peers to get their feedback about the findings. For triangulation of data sources, I compared the data yielded from interviews, observations, and artifacts. This process helped me conclude that one method was not better than the other, but rather that the two methods (observations and artifacts) were complementary, adding insight into the nature of interactions between students and tutors. The nature of data yielded from artifacts, for the most part, contradicted data from observations and interviews. Specifically, strategies shared by novice tutors in the coaches’ blog as being effective when working with ESL/international students were not beneficial for meeting expectations of these students. I highlighted those differences in my
findings. Lastly, to strengthen trustworthiness, I also provided information on my positionality earlier in this chapter.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided information about the researcher’s positionality, research design, participant selection criteria, data collection, data analysis procedures, and steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. It also provided the rationale for utilizing a case study design to explore the experiences of the international doctoral students with the Writing Center at PUM. I collected data from 17 interviews, 15 observations, and Writing Center-related artifacts. I analyzed the data through multiple rounds of coding to identify the themes that best illustrated the interactions of international doctoral students and the Writing Center tutors.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the interactions of international doctoral students with the tutors at the Writing Center of PUM and explore how their Writing Center experiences contributed to the students’ overall academic experiences. Two research questions (RQs) guided this study:

1. How do international doctoral students describe their interactions with the writing center tutors?
2. How does the writing center contribute to international doctoral students’ academic experiences?

This study explored the international doctoral students’ interactions with their tutors only from the students’ perspectives and did not attempt to examine the tutors’ perceptions of those interactions. In addition to providing the findings from interviews, this chapter also presents the findings obtained from observations of tutoring sessions and from relevant Writing Center artifacts. Those findings are discussed in the relevant sections.

International Students’ Experiences with Writing Center Tutors

The first research question examined how the students described their interactions with the tutors at the Writing Center. The following themes detail the students’ perceptions of their interactions in their initial and later sessions.
When the students talked about their initial sessions, they mainly commented on their tutorial interactions. Tutorial interaction is defined as an interaction that occurs between a tutor and a student with the purpose of getting feedback about the assignment through one-to-one instruction (Harris, 1995). This type of interaction is regulated by social interactions, meaning that social interactions affect the amount and type of talk which occurs during the interactions (Heath, 1983; Heritage, 1987). Thus, the discourse which happens in tutorial interactions is important because the content of the talk during those interactions might either restrict or enhance the participants’ opportunities for learning (Heritage, 1987).

The first two themes (experiences contributing to negative perceptions of tutorial interactions and experiences contributing to positive perceptions of tutorial interactions) helped me understand whether the students were satisfied or dissatisfied with the discourse in their initial sessions. The third theme – preference for working with the same tutor – demonstrated how the students’ descriptions of their later sessions differed from their perceptions of initial tutoring interactions after they started to work with the same tutors on a frequent basis.

**Experiences Contributing to Negative Perceptions of Tutorial Interactions**

In my study, at least eight participants reported they were dissatisfied with their initial interactions with the tutors at the Writing Center. Their dissatisfaction with the sessions were mainly due to lack of conversation between them and their tutor due to unbalanced power dynamics or unmet expectations.
Some students reported they had expectations of the sessions, such as finishing proofreading of their papers within one hour. However, due to the students’ limited language skills, tutors were dominating in those sessions, deciding what kind of assistance the students needed. For example, Antonio said:

I thought I had a good level of English because I finished eight levels of English in my country. When I came to the Wiring Center for the first time, the tutor asked me which things I wanted her to focus on. I said, “I don’t know.” I could not explain what was wrong with my paper because many sections had to be rewritten. Then she asked me, “What was the assignment about?” So, I tried to answer her questions, explaining what I tried to write. Then, we started checking the paper. We went through, I don’t know, maybe five or six pages in an hour. From my perspective, it was very few pages [laughs] because I expected to go through the whole paper, and I could not say that.

Antonio thought that he had a good English language proficiency because he completed advanced levels of English in his country, but he was aware that his academic writing skills needed improvement. He visited the Writing Center to get some help with proofreading and editing. The tutor asked him some questions to elicit information to gauge the level of assistance he needed. However, Antonio could not respond to her questions because of his lack of English language skills.

Although the tutor helped him edit some parts of his paper, Antonio felt that his expectation from that tutorial session was not quite met. The tutor was taking a more authoritative role in that session because Antonio could not show the sections that needed some revisions so that they could finish checking his paper within the one-hour session.

Ahmed also described that he had negative experiences. He said:

They asked me what I’m looking for, and I did not know what to say. And they made me to check a box or something. After that, the tutors checked for grammar, but they did not do it correctly, and I could not say ask for the right assistance because of lack of my
speaking skills. And when, I submitted my paper to the professor, he said, "You didn't fix it." I was so disappointed.

Ahmed described that the tutors were asking some questions to understand the assistance he needed, but due to his lack of speaking and writing skills, he could not explain it well. The tutors were deciding what type of assistance he might need, asking him to check next to the boxes on types of assistance. Trusting the tutors’ skills, Ahmed thought they did their job correctly, but when he submitted his paper, the professor asked him to resubmit because he had some errors in his paper.

Reflecting on her initial session, Maria said, “I really expected that it would be faster, but then I realized it was a slow process. I thought that I go with the whole paper, and in one hour, we do it completely, but that was not like that.” As seen from her response, Maria thought that she could get assistance with her whole paper within a one-hour session. Similar to Antonio’s and Ahmed’s cases, in Maria’s session, tutors were deciding the level of help she needed and provided the assistance they thought was reasonable within the one-hour session.

According to the students’ descriptions of the tutorial interactions, tutors were deciding what kind of assistance students needed with their papers. Due to their lack of English language skills, students did not contribute to the dialogue that occurred during their sessions, showing unbalanced power dynamics between them and tutors. Moreover, one-hour tutoring sessions were perceived as not enough time for these students.
Unmet Expectations

Some students were disappointed with their initial sessions because tutors seemed uninterested in gauging the assistance they needed. Therefore, the students perceived those sessions as negative. For example, Ali was also disappointed with his first tutoring session. He explained it in the following way:

So first, when I came here, so there was an expectation that, not only like and/or those corrections, I thought I was going to get some help about like sentence restructuring, getting some suggestions about sentences. So, I think it wasn’t fulfilled when I came here.

When describing his first session, Ali mainly described the assistance he expected, without commenting on the tutor’s personality or demeanor during the session. Ali’s expectation differed from that of Antonio’s and Maria’s. Instead of having his paper fully checked, Ali wanted to get feedback on the overall organization of his paper. He expected a tutor to be knowledgeable about international students’ writing problems and provide assistance accordingly.

Farhad also reported dissatisfaction with his first session. He noted:

I spent only one-year learning English at the ESL Center. So, when I started my graduate program, I needed someone who can help with grammar, develop the idea, clarity of the idea, spelling, punctuation. When I first visited the Center, I expected that someone will sit with me and read my paper, and [snaps fingers] in five minutes or so, we will finish everything, but that was not the case. So, I felt disappointed, but I had to provide a proof about the Writing Center attendance. She didn’t understand what I wrote about. So, I had to explain what’s the paper about because she didn’t understand anything about the purpose of the paper.

As Farhad had studied English only for a short period of time, he was aware of his lack of writing skills. Thus, when he first visited the Writing Center, he expected that tutors would help him with proofreading and editing his paper within one hour, but his expectation was not met. Farhad was especially frustrated with the fact that the tutor did not ask him thought-provoking
questions. For this reason, he left the session feeling disappointed. The only reason he stayed until the session ended was that he needed to provide proof of his visit to the Center. Farhad’s experience contradicts to Antonio’s description of his first tutorial interaction because, in Farhad’s case, the tutor did not ask any questions to better understand the assistance that Farhad needed.

Describing her disappointment with her initial sessions, Mehreen said:

I had been serving as an English teacher for last fourteen years. So, I would like to mention that in the beginning, there were few cases in the writing center, and I wasn’t satisfied with those writing coaches. Um, I don’t know [pause]. I wanted them to explain something. I was expecting something more, and they were not like facilitating in the way I was expecting. Yes, that was my first experience and I didn’t like that.

Being a former teacher of English for almost 14 years in her country, Mehreen started to visit the Writing Center to get assistance with her papers. Although she was not sure what kind of assistance the tutors could provide, she expected tutors to be more engaging during sessions. She was frustrated with the fact that in her initial sessions the tutors did not try to understand the knowledge or assistance she needed. For instance, Mehreen expected that tutors would at least teach her some information related to writing.

Rabia perceived her first session as negative. She described it in the following way:

I remember I worked with someone; she was not nice. I thought that it was because maybe I am wearing a hijab. During the session, I kept asking questions, but she didn’t respond to me. Instead, she kept nodding. I thought, ‘Maybe she would explain later in the session.’ My expectation was that the tutor would correct for me if I needed something to be corrected, but she told me, ‘You have to figure out yourself to correct it.’

Rabia perceived her initial interaction with the tutor as negative because her expectation of that session was not met. First, as she described, the tutor seemed not interested in understanding the assistance she expected. Second, she felt that she was discriminated against because of her cultural background as she was wearing a hijab (a head cover). Similar to
Farhad’s tutor, Rabia’s tutor also did not ask any questions to understand the help she needed. Rabia was especially disappointed with the tutor saying that she had to fix the errors by herself.

Findings from the new coaches’ blog attested to the fact that American tutors expected the students to correct errors by themselves. For example, one of the tutors noted, “I do believe it is the most effective way to help [ESL] students edit their own papers. Instead of telling a student how to fix a sentence, asking them what the sentence means can often resolve the problem.” By sharing his assumption, the tutor believed that all students possess the capability of detecting their own mistakes. In this case, the tutor does not take into account the lack of language proficiency of the ESL students in that they will not be able to detect their own mistakes.

Some students who had had negative experiences in their initial sessions also shared how they had to seek help outside the Writing Center, such as from their friends or other people. For example, Ahmed said, “I started to send my papers to my father because he is a retired English teacher.” Ahmed mentioned that after having negative experiences with his initial tutoring sessions, he asked his father to help him with proofreading his paper because he was an English teacher in his home country for many years.

As mentioned earlier, Farhad also had a negative experience with his first tutorial interaction, so he approached one of his friends to improve his academic writing. He described it in the following way:

I asked one of my friends who was in the third year of his doctoral degree in this department here, he was a President of Saudi Student Association. And I told him that we are four people. Could you please help us to find someone who can speak our language and help us with English? Who can give us like a direction of the writing and develop our skills? He arranged a schedule for us to work with a PhD student who was an Arab American and fluent both in Arabic and in English. That person prepared for us a workshop twice a week. So, we met with that guy in the first semester, which is to be honest, it was like very great.
Since Farhad was dissatisfied with his initial tutorial interaction at the Writing Center, he mentioned that he approached the president of Saudi Student Association (SSA) at the university. The president of SSA happened to be a PhD student from the same department as Farhad, so Farhad asked him to find a person who was fluent both in Arabic and English and could teach Farhad and the other three students writing skills. The president of SSA found a student who organized workshops for the students, teaching them academic writing skills. By meeting with that student twice a week during one semester, Farhad and the other students could improve their writing. For this reason, Farhad emphasized that it was a great experience for him.

The responses of participants regarding their initial sessions indicated that several students were dissatisfied with either the discourse or lack thereof during their interactions with the tutors. Specifically, some students were frustrated with the fact that the tutors did not ask questions to understand the assistance they needed.

**Limited Assistance from Undergraduate Student Tutors**

In addition, some students perceived that tutoring sessions with undergraduate tutors were unproductive as they only got assistance with grammar. Since these doctoral students needed help with graduate-level writing, they were frustrated with fact that undergraduate student tutors lacked the knowledge to provide assistance with that level of writing. For example, when talking about her initial session, Lian reflected on her experience with working with undergraduate tutors. She said:

My major was English literature from a university in mainland China. After I got my first master’s degree from Hong Kong, I taught English. Um, basically I taught GRE reading and the IELTS reading sections.
Undergraduate students [laughs], they are English speakers, but they only like correct the plural or singular those simple things that I can even correct myself. Most of them usually say, ‘Oh, I don’t know your topic. I don’t know much about this. So, we will just work on very basic grammar.’ In my opinion, this is not right. Undergraduate student-tutors need training on teaching international students on sentence structure, paragraph structure, rather than only plural or singular.

Lian earned her undergraduate degree in English literature from a university in her home country. After graduation, she started teaching reading skills in English there. Therefore, she had good knowledge of English, and when coming to the Writing Center, she did not seek assistance with grammar because she could fix those errors by herself. Lian shared her frustration with the undergraduate student tutors’ talk before the sessions when they explicitly stated they would address only grammatical problems during the sessions. Lian expected to get a feedback on the whole organization of her paper rather than focusing on grammatical errors. As that expectation was not met, she recommended that undergraduate students needed some training for working with international graduate students so students can get feedback on the content of the paper as a whole.

Findings from the new coaches’ blog section on ESL/international students’ writing challenges also showed some American tutors assumed addressing grammatical errors was more helpful when working with ESL/international students. For example, one tutor wrote:

By understanding that an [ESL] client is used to putting a certain accent mark over a letter or putting the noun before the adjective in a sentence, the tutor can address their needs more effectively and know how best to help fix the paper.

The tutor assumed that he could understand the typical errors ESL students make by paying close attention to these students’ styles of writing. Therefore, the tutor noted that he could provide effective feedback for students in terms of proofreading their papers.
Valeria’s experience resonated with Lian’s frustrations. Valeria described her negative experiences working with undergraduate student tutors in the following way:

I want them to understand that I have no idea of it [American academic writing requirements]. It’s that I was clueless [given my educational background], and I could only imagine how hard might be for them [new international students]. Um, it’s frustrating to realize that undergraduate student tutors are unaware of the fact that we don’t know how to ask the right question because we don’t know what professors are looking for in our paper. So, I expect undergraduate students to know. We are trained for that, to provide help with basic research. They should put that knowledge for better use.

Although Valeria had good proficiency in English, initially she was not familiar with requirements of academic writing in English. For this reason, she was frustrated with the undergraduate student tutors’ lack of knowledge about international students’ unfamiliarity with the expectations of the U.S. academic discourse. Valeria did not have a prior educational experience in the U.S.; therefore, she did not know what questions to ask the tutors to get the assistance she needed. Presently working as a tutor at the Writing Center, she is now aware of the fact that undergraduate student tutors were trained for tutoring international students. Therefore, she wished the tutors practiced the knowledge they had learned by effectively teaching students about the expectations of academic discourse/research.

Findings from the new coaches’ blog revealed that American undergraduate tutors expected the international students to ask questions during sessions. For example, one of the new tutors mentioned, “I think it is helpful if the [ESL] client is more open to me versus being distant and quiet. We both learn more about what the writer is trying to say when they are open and more comfortable.” As it is evident from the statement, that this novice tutor was unaware that due to international students’ lack of knowledge about U.S. academic writing or language proficiency, these students may not be able to start a conversation or ask
adequate questions of tutors, thereby being mistakenly perceived as uninterested in interacting with the tutors.

**Experiences Contributing to Positive Perceptions of Tutorial Interactions**

Contrary to the eight participants’ negative perceptions of their initial sessions and/or interactions thereafter, nine of the participants in this study described their initial encounters with tutors as positive. They shared their experiences, noting nice and welcoming atmosphere the tutors provided and discussed how some tutors met their expectations in tutoring sessions.

**Welcoming and Friendly Environment**

Many students in this study mentioned the welcoming and friendly environment the tutors at the Writing Center provided. For example, Helen perceived her first impression about the interactions with her tutor as friendly. She described that session in the following way:

I remember the first section vividly. I made an appointment, and then I went to the writing center. I remember the first person I worked with. I was like terrified, just like a rabbit in the forest, just terrified because I didn’t expect that they would ask me to read my papers. But I knew I had to get this done because I was turning it the following week. She was so nice and kind because she immediately noticed that I’m struggling with reading. So, she started reading my paper herself.

Helen noted that she remembered her first session clearly. As she described, she initially felt reluctant and even scared to come to the Center. However, she needed some help with her paper before submitting it to her professor. When she came to her appointment, she felt uncomfortable when the tutor asked to read her paper. She was happy when the tutor noticed her lack of English language skills. Therefore, the tutor started to read the paper, and for this reason, she described that tutor as “nice” and “kind.”
Helen’s experience, however, contradicts the finding from one of the artifacts in the new coaches’ blog. In that blog, tutors asserted that when asked to read their papers aloud, ESL students would help them detect their own mistakes. Specifically, one tutor wrote, “I think that having the student read out loud helps the student work on their English and helps to catch their mistakes.” Reading-aloud strategy might help some international students who have good English writing skills, but for students who lack that proficiency, it is not beneficial, as they are not able to detect their own errors.

Reflecting on her first session, Maria noted, “First, I felt it was an environment that was welcoming. An environment where I could openly say like, ‘I don’t know how to write.’ And they said, ‘It is okay, this is the space to learn how to write.’” Maria described her first session as being in a conducive environment for learning. She perceived that the Center was a safe place where she could acknowledge her shortcomings with writing in English and improve her writing skills.

Talking about her initial sessions, Selena noted, “I think they are nice and friendly professionals.” According to Selena’s description, she perceived her first interactions as welcoming, noting specifically the friendliness of tutors.

Meeting Students’ Expectations

Some students shared how they received the assistance they expected from the tutoring sessions. Therefore, they perceived the sessions as productive and conducive to learning. For example, reflecting on her initial session, Ayesha noted:
Once I was there for the first time, they asked me ‘What things do you want to work on?’ And then I mentioned my project to them, and then they started working with me. They mentioned, ‘This thing needs to be corrected.’ So, that was amazing.

As seen from her description, Ayesha liked her initial session. She was especially impressed by the tutor’s interest in her paper, shown by asking questions to elicit information on what kind of help she needed. For this reason, she described that session as “amazing.”

Describing her satisfaction with her initial session, Song said, “I happened to encounter one good American tutor; she was female and then she was really meticulous. In reading my paper then she was able to identify the weakness and the strengths of my paper.” As seen from Song’s description, she was satisfied with the fact the tutor could understand what kind of assistance Song needed. Therefore, Song emphasized the tutor’s ability to identify strong and weak points in her paper.

In sum, some students described their initial interactions with tutors as welcoming or friendly, drawing conclusions from the environment the tutors created for them and the assistance they received from the tutors. The students perceived those interactions as friendly only when tutors were engaged in the session and asked the right questions to understand the help these students needed.

Preference for Working with the Same Tutors

As the students started to visit the Writing Center frequently, their descriptions of the nature of tutorial interactions were more positive because they built relationships with some tutors. At least nine students mentioned they started building long-term relationships with some tutors due to their visits to the Center. The students reported different reasons that contributed to
their preference for working with the same tutors, such as the conducive environment for learning or the tutors’ ability to meet their expectations.

Conducive Learning Environment and Friendly Relationships

Many students mentioned that tutors created a favorable environment for them where they could improve their writings. For example, Ali said, “I always select her because I know that she is great. She also knows me very well and my topic. So, I feel really comfortable working with her.” Ali noted that he preferred to work with the same tutor because of the comfortable interactions he had with that tutor during the sessions. The familiarity of the tutor with his field also facilitated a conducive environment for learning.

When I observed Ali’s session, he seemed comfortable because he had been coming to the Center for a long time. The tutor remained respectful during the whole session, saying, “Now, we have found a solution. Should we carry the same way?” The talk that occurred between them seemed to be a learning experience for Ali.

Explaining her preference to work with the same tutor, Ayesha noted, “I mean those tutors are really nice, for example, Tutor X and Tutor Z. I mean, they are really nice. I like working with them because they are also knowledgeable.” For Ayesha, the tutors’ knowledge as well as their friendly characters were the main reasons for her preference for working with the same tutors. For this reason, she selected certain tutors to work with on a regular basis.

Mehreen mentioned that a friendly relationship with a tutor was the main reason for her preference for working with the same tutor. Although in the interview Mehreen noted that she felt comfortable asking that tutor questions, during my observation of her sessions, she seemed a little shy to ask questions. Mehreen comes from a traditional Islamic culture; therefore, when
working with the male American tutor, she seemed nervous. She kept biting her lips during the whole session. When I asked her to explain her behavior in the interview, she said her cultural and religious background sometimes made her feel a little bit anxious when interacting with that tutor.

Even though Mehreen seemed a little nervous during the tutoring session, she felt it was still better for her to work with him rather than with a random tutor. During the session, the tutor gave her feedback by explaining the difference between concepts of teaching and education because Mehreen did not make a clear distinction between those two concepts in her paper. The tutor tried to make her comfortable during the sessions by asking some questions that were not related to the paper. For example, he asked, “How is your TA-ship going?” The tutor also told some jokes to make Mehreen smile. Mehreen shared her preference for working with the same tutor in the following way:

I have a friendly relationship or bonding with him. So, I always ask him if he could explain a grammatical rule. For example, I ask ‘Why is it so?’ Or, I ask him, ‘Can you recommend me something so I can read more to improve this thing?’ In this regard, he is helpful.

As Mehreen explained, her preference for working with the same tutor was because of the tutor’s friendly character and skills. She noted developing a friendly relationship with that tutor, and for this reason, she felt comfortable to ask questions during tutoring sessions. She also asked the tutor to recommend some resources to improve her writing skills.

Helen also preferred to work with the same tutor because she developed a relationship with the tutor. She said:

I have some sort of attachment with a particular person. So that’s why for the first, second and third years in this program, I basically worked with that particular tutor every week. I didn’t just randomly work with someone; I liked the way how we work with that particular person and her style.
As Helen mentioned, initially she kept working only with one tutor on a weekly basis. Over the first three years of her doctoral program, Helen developed a close bond with that tutor because of that tutor’s style. For this reason, Helen did not prefer to work with any other tutor as she became accustomed to that tutor’s style.

Effective Feedback

In the context of writing centers, effective feedback is interpreted as tutors providing advice for students on how to improve their academic writing skills (Mazen, 2018). Some students in this study mentioned some effective strategies the tutors used. Those strategies enhanced their learning, contributing to their preference for working with the same tutors.

Annisa explained the tutor’s effective feedback in the following way:

She always says, ‘Let’s break that down. So, you have to start with this and then this. Then, she asked, ‘So you mean this?’ Okay, let's do it.' You know, like, so, um, she's really helpful in guiding me with that.

According to Annisa, the tutor helped her to express her ideas clearly by breaking longer sentences into shorter ones. In that way, the tutor explained her how to better organize the ideas. Therefore, Annisa appreciated the guidance from the tutor.

I had a chance to observe two of Annisa’s sessions with the same tutor. During pre and post-interview observations, the tutor was always checking in with Annisa to make sure she understood her feedback. For instance, in both sessions, the tutor asked her questions such as, “Is it safe to say?” or “Is it fair to say?” to see whether Annisa agreed with her suggestions.

Highlighting the effective feedback given by tutors, Farhad noted:

The tutors taught me how to divide into two sentences when you have like a long sentence, into more readable two sentences, you know. Sometimes, when they find like, let’s say, the context of something good. They told me, ‘You use this sentence in a good
way.” They would say, ‘This idea may need more clarity. So, you might add examples. You use another word and describe it more properly to the reader.’

Farhad mentioned how a tutor taught him how to make simple sentences. Additionally, the tutors with whom he worked frequently praised him when they noticed he could explain the content of his paper clearly. More importantly, the tutors gave helpful suggestions that enhanced Farhad’s learning on how to articulate his ideas to the intended audience. Both the motivational and teaching strategies the tutors used were perceived as beneficial by Farhad.

Similar to Farhad, Helen also mentioned how she benefitted from the effective teaching of tutors. She said:

When I was working with the tutors at the Writing Center, they always told, “Oh, the sentences are way too long and that this is the phrase that is a little bit counter intuitive. So, they would give me a suggestion in terms of how to write more like the people who normally write in the United States. So that was a very long process to keep adjusting my writing style.

Helen also mentioned how the tutors taught her how to better express her ideas by breaking longer sentences into more readable sentences or by teaching her how to use appropriate phrases. By giving effective feedback, the tutors helped Helen learn the writing styles commonly practiced in American academic writing. Even though it was hard for Helen to change her writing habits, she began to adjust her style to meet the required norms of writing.

Valeria also underscored the tutors’ skills as an important attribute for enhancing student learning. She noted, “Some tutors I worked with have the ability of reading through and giving feedback about the whole paper and stuff, not only checking grammar. They have a very critical eye and skills. They also make you feel comfortable to learn.” Valeria shared her experience working with tutors who had the ability to review her papers and provide feedback on the whole
paper. She emphasized that some tutors had skills to provide constructive feedback, instead of just checking her grammatical mistakes.

Valeria’s statement about tutors being skillful in addressing the whole organization of the paper, rather than only the grammatical problems, resonated with the assertions made by a tutor in the new coaches’ blog. For example, one of the new tutors wrote in the ESL section of the blog: “Throughout the appointment, I will keep note of any grammatical errors and refer back to them later after the [ESL] client and I have had time to discuss high-order concerns (organization, sentence structure, clarity, etc.). This is to make sure that we are not spending an excessive amount of time on grammatical errors.” Effective feedback provided through scaffolding technique was helpful for the international doctoral students to improve their writing skills. Therefore, the students appreciate the tutors being skillful in providing such feedback.

**Expectations of Future Tutoring Sessions**

After sharing their preferences for working with the same tutors, the majority of students highlighted that they expected the tutors to be knowledgeable and skilled in teaching the intricacies of academic writing. The students discussed their expectations because they were aware that some tutors might graduate long before the students finished their own respective programs. For this reason, these students expected the tutors with whom they intended to work in future to possess knowledge and skills. Some students mentioned personal characteristics would also be important as they would be more comfortable working with tutors who possessed good personality traits.

**Knowledge and skills.** When sharing their expectations for future tutoring sessions, the students noted that if tutors possessed knowledge about the scholarly nuances and the necessary
skills to teach that knowledge, they would have benefitted more from those sessions. For example, Antonio mentioned, “Skills, yeah, I don't care about the personality because I'm going to be there for one hour. If you come and the tutor is telling me, ‘This paper, it's crap,” that is totally fine. I mean, I never take it personally. Okay, just tell me whatever I did wrong and I'm fine with that.” Antonio noted that he would prefer more constructive feedback in future tutorial interactions. Even though the tutors would have told him straightforwardly that his paper was not a good paper, he said he would be still willing to accept any criticism. In other words, Antonio expected tutors to provide more directive feedback, as it would help him improve his writing skills.

Helen’s response resonated with Antonio’s statement. She said, “I want them to be critical because I want to improve my writing in my field. So, I am willing to accept any criticism, even though sometimes might be painful.” Helen discussed her expectations for future tutoring sessions, highlighting her willingness to accept any criticism if it helped her become a better writer in her field of study.

In this regard, Ayesha noted, “We have a lot of expectations that our assignments will be fixed, our writing problems will be fixed. So, we expect to see an experienced tutor from whom we can really learn something new about writing in our field.” Ayesha explained she would prefer to work with tutors who are experienced and can teach her writing skills because she expected tutors to give constructive feedback on assignments by identifying her writing problems.

In this regard, Raj mentioned, “Knowledge of tutors is very important. So, they need to teach how to write English in their fields of study.” Raj also noted his preference to work with knowledgeable tutors who can help him become a better writer in his discipline.
In this regard, Bao said, “I think, uh, knowledge, because [they are] native speakers.” Bao thought that if he worked with American tutors, they could teach him necessary knowledge about writing because they were native speakers. In contrast, Mohamed emphasized that skills were more important in a tutor: “The personality is, uh, I think it's not the most important thing for me, skills are more important.” In a similar vein, Selena said, “The most important thing is their skills in English, academic English writing, and that's it.” Mohamed and Selena highlighted the skills as being more important than personality of a tutor.

As seen from students’ responses, they preferred to work with knowledgeable and skillful tutors in the future. They believed that those tutors would be capable of teaching them the essential knowledge about academic writing.

**Personal characteristics.** Some students mentioned that if tutors possessed a good personality, future tutorial sessions would be more productive. For example, Maria noted, “I want to work with a person who has a really good personality. I would assume that she might have skills as well. Then, I would have a nice and comfortable atmosphere for learning.” As seen from Maria’s response, she expected tutors to have a good personality and assumed that if tutors had nice personality, they would also possess necessary skills as to teach her writing skills.

Raj said, “I would prefer to work with nonjudgmental people because everybody makes errors. It would be very hard to work with judgmental people.” For Raj, it was important that the tutors were not too critical during tutoring sessions. He preferred to work with tutors who showed understanding of typical errors that international students tended to make.

In sum, the findings related to the students’ preference for working with the same tutors mainly focused on developing close friendly relationships with tutors and/or on the effective feedback they provided. Skilled tutors were using strategies that helped students effectively
articulate their ideas in their papers. Such tutorial interactions helped students not only improve their writing skills but also helped them gain more knowledge in an environment conducive to learning.

In future tutoring sessions, the students expected to work with tutors who were knowledgeable and skilled in teaching them the essential knowledge about academic writing in their fields of study or writing in general. The students expressed their willingness to accept any criticism on their papers if they could benefit from the tutorial interactions by learning about the intricacies of academic writing. As for some students, a good personality was an important trait for tutors to possess because friendly tutors could provide an environment more conducive to learning.

**Summary of Findings of Research Question 1**

In this study, students were either satisfied or dissatisfied with the tutorial interactions during their initial sessions. In addition to dissatisfaction with her initial session, one student perceived that she was being discriminated against because of her cultural background based on the tutor’s demeanor. However, due to frequent visits to the Writing Center, the students worked with tutors with different levels of knowledge and personalities, and as a result of getting effective feedback from some tutors, several students were able to build long-term relationships with those tutors.

Nine out of the eleven students I had a chance to observe prior to scheduling interviews with them had already been working with the same tutors for a long time. Therefore, they were comfortable asking guidance from the tutors and were receptive to the tutors’ feedback, suggesting that the effective feedback contributed to the formation of the long-term relationships
with tutors. In sum, the students’ comments about their interactions with tutors reflected the nature of the dialogue between them and the tutors. Some students gauged those talks as either a learning process or lack thereof and underscored the tutors’ skills in making the process engaging.

Writing Center’s Contribution to Students’ Academic Experiences

The second research question examined how the Writing Center experience of students contributed to their overall academic experiences at PUM. The themes extracted from the students’ responses revealed that the Writing Center experience contributed to their academic experiences in many different ways. First, professors’ recommendations played a critical role for the students to becoming acquainted with the Writing Center and seeking academic support. Second, after their frequent visits to the Center, they observed their growth as scholars, thereby observing the change in their own identities as writers. Third, students came to realize that the Writing Center also helped them socialize both inside and outside of academia.

Writing Center as an Extension of Class

Some students noted they started visiting the Writing Center because their professors referred them to the Center. The professors helped these students enhance their academic experiences at PUM, and in this case, the Writing Center served as an extension of class.

Professors’ Recommendations to Visit the Writing Center for Academic Success

Some students mentioned that their professors encouraged them to visit the Writing Center either by assigning them extra credit for attending and/or making it a requirement of the
course. Therefore, initially, the students visited the Center only to obtain proof of visiting the Writing Center to satisfy the class requirement. For this reason, students perceived the Writing Center only as an institutional resource that could primarily support them academically.

Antonio mentioned that he went to the Writing Center following his professor’s recommendation. “Whenever our professor mentions it, it’s okay, I have to go for his or her assignment, and that’s it.” As Antonio mentioned, when the professors required them to visit the Center, he had to go there to satisfy the course requirement. Similarly sharing his professor’s recommendation to visit the Writing Center, Farhad said, “He told me, ‘If you bring to me a proof, I will make up your grade.’ I had discussion board assignments, and each discussion was worth 1-2 points, so I thought it would be good for my grade.”

Commenting on her professor-referred visit, Helen noted, “Many professors were asking for the proof, like the sheet, that the Writing Center provides. Some professors ask a student to have at least one Writing Center appointment, one sheet per semester.” Helen went to the Center only to meet the academic requirements. For her, it was important to get a proof from the Writing Center that attested to her visit to the Center.

The students appreciated the professors’ recommendations to visit the Writing Center by assigning them extra credit if they submitted proof about their visits. Therefore, they initially perceived the Writing Center as an academic support.

Professors’ Encouragement to Visit the Writing Center to Improve Writing Skills

A few students mentioned how professors helped them succeed academically. Ahmed said that after he submitted his first assignments to the professor, the professor talked to him about the shortcomings in his papers. The professor told him he was aware that English was not
Ahmed’s first language; therefore, the professor recommended he should visit the Writing Center, noting that if he got assistance with his papers at the Center, he could improve his writings. Ahmed appreciated his professor’s recommendation to visit the Writing Center. He said:

After the first or the second assignment I had submitted, the professor talked to me. He told, “I think it’s better to check it with the writing center. I understand it is your second language. It is your first semester.” So, he gave me the information about the writing center. I knew my skills were not enough to write in academics.

Farhad decided to follow his professor’s recommendation to visit the Writing Center as the professor encouraged him to improve his writing. He noted:

The professor told me, “I know that you are an international student and this your first week, or the first like discussion board you had at this university.” And he asked me, “How long have you been speaking English?” I answered, “Maybe 12 months?” He told me, “There is like a Center. So, they’re going to help you a lot. Your writing is not bad, but I can’t read it.” [Laughs]. So, in my first semester it was a good idea from my professor towards just me.

Farhad was appreciative of his professor’s recommendation to go to the Writing Center. First, the professor asked him to share his experience of learning English. His professor explained to him that he could not clearly articulate his ideas in his paper. After learning that Farhad had not been learning English sufficiently enough to satisfy the requirements of the doctoral program, he recommended that Farhad should visit the Writing Center. Although Farhad initially wanted to meet the course requirements, at the same time he was also motivated to go the Center to improve his academic writing.

Maria also noted that she started visiting the Center after her professor’s referrals. She said:

When I was 15 years old, I really had a pretty good English. I thought had a good level of English. I took TOEFL and it was a good TOEFL, and I took the GRE. But when I came
here, I have been talking a lot with professors and also with my advisor and they told me, ‘This is not a good writing. I don’t understand anything that you have written.’ So, I realized that the English that I learned in our countries is a language that is super formal in that you cannot even tell back how to tie shoes. Especially, it is not sufficient for the PhD level. That experience made me go more often to the writing center there and then find people native speakers that helped me.

Maria learned English extensively in her home country, and as a result, she thought that she had good English language skills. She had passed TOEFL, the English language proficiency test, with good scores. As part of the graduate school requirement, she also took the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). However, after trying to converse in English to say basic things, she realized that her English was not good enough for the doctoral program. When she started her program, some of her professors recommended that she should go to the Writing Center. They told her that she could not clearly present her ideas in the academic papers, and therefore, they could not understand her writing. Following her professors’ advice, Maria started coming to the Center, preferring to work with native speaker tutors.

As seen from the responses, many students started visiting the Writing Center following their professors’ recommendations, providing the first step in international doctoral students’ exposure to the academic culture at PUM. Many of the professors showed understanding of the international students’ lack of English language skills by individually talking to each student about their writing problems and recommending they should check their papers at the Writing Center. Other professors made it a requirement to visit the Writing Center by asking them to provide proof about their sessions at the Center.
Improvement of Writing Skills and Growth as a Scholar

In the previous section, students described the Writing Center as an academic support service to which they had been introduced through their professors. Due to their frequent visits to the Center, they also started seeing the Center as a resource for improving their writing and learning more about academic requirements outside of class assignments and finding their own voices in writing.

Improving Writing Skills

Many students mentioned that through tutoring sessions at the Writing Center they improved their writing skills. For example, Farhad said, “Through my frequent visits to Center, I have noticed my progress or more development in my writings. So, the motivation is to gain more idea about writing.” Farhad was motivated to come to the Center because he saw improvement in his writing skills. Therefore, he wanted to continue his visits to expand his knowledge on academic writing.

Antonio also commented on going to the Writing Center beyond his class assignments: “When you go, it is your own motivation. It is because you are working on your own writing approach or improving your own skills.” For Antonio, it was important to find his own style of writing. At the same time, he was motivated to improve his writing skills.

Valeria shared how she noticed improvement in her writing. She said, “When I read my first semester, second semester papers, and then my third semesters, I can see the difference.” Valeria was satisfied with the improvement in her academic writing after she compared the papers that she wrote for the assignments in her first and third semesters.
Mohamed stated, “Sometimes I write something that’s clear for me, but when American professors read it, they get confused, even if it is clear for me. The Writing Center helps me with that.” Mohamed shared how he got assistance in terms of articulating his ideas to American professors because they thought his ideas were not clearly presented in his papers. He appreciated that the Writing Center provided such assistance.

**Wanting to Learn About Writing Outside of Class Assignments**

Other students mentioned they utilized the Writing Center as a resource not only for helping with academic papers but also for writing scholarly works. For example, Ali came to the Writing Center to get assistance with scholarly writings. He noted, “In addition to my PhD dissertation work, I also like to get help sometimes on some other works, such as my essay writing. I am planning to publish those essays.” Ali was motivated to engage in scholarly writing. For this reason, he was visiting the Center to get feedback for his scholarly works and to develop his identity as a scholar.

Lian was also motivated to visit the Center because she was engaged in scholarly writing. She said, “Now I’m writing for a journal. I want to publish my article by the end of this semester, hopefully. So, I have to go to the Writing Center.” As seen from Lian’s response, she was working on her article. For this reason, she decided to visit the Center to get assistance with the article she intended to publish.

Other students, such as Farhad, Helen, and Mehreen, also shared how visits to the Writing Center helped them revise scholarly research they were engaged in. The Writing Center, in these cases, went beyond being only for academic support; instead, it became a hub of professional development resources for doctoral students.
In addition to improving their writing and developing their writing skills as scholars, some students mentioned that they wanted to take advantage of the Writing Center by learning how to sound American in their writings. For example, Maria said:

Now I come to the Center to be better understood by the American audience. One of targets is I want also, especially during these last third year, to find my own voice. Now, I can say what I want to say in the paper. So, my sessions at the writing center became more efficient. And that has happened because it’s after three years of coming every single day, doing the same thing, I have evolved.

One of Maria’s motivations was to improve her writing skills so she could clearly articulate her ideas to American readers. At the same time, she also wanted to find her own voice in American academic writing. After frequent visits to the Center, Maria noticed that her writing skills improved significantly. As a result, she became confident in asking for the assistance she needed, and therefore, she noted that her visits to the Center became more productive.

Rabia’s statement resonated with Maria’s response. She noted, “I like to learn the American way to write because during the whole program, I will study it here. So, I want to write a sentence what Americans would express. I like coming here because tutors can help with that.” In addition to getting help with her papers, Rabia noted that she wanted to learn how to sound American in her writing. She went to the Center to take advantage of the tutoring services since she realized she could gradually internalize the intricacies of American academic writing.

In this regard, Selena said:

I would like to sound like an American in my writing. So sometimes the grammar was correct. But we need to change some words or some expression or some preposition to make sense. I am good in English but when someone a native speaker or who has more knowledge in English, they said “No, it’s confusing. I don’t understand.” And then I had to explain what I want to say.
Selena thought her writing in English was good, but when native speakers read her papers, they could not understand her ideas. She wanted to learn how to present her ideas clearly by learning to make small changes to her papers and sound like a native speaker in her writings.

**Students’ Changing Identities as Writers and Scholars**

Since the students frequently came to the Center, they gradually became knowledgeable about U.S. academic rhetoric. They also observed their changing identities as they were becoming active participants in the tutoring sessions, contributing more to the conversation with tutors. Their frequent visits to the Writing Center also helped students increase their abilities to advocate for themselves.

Helen’s example of her first tutoring session shows her changing identity as she improved her writing skills. Helen described her first session: “I just sit there silently, and that was so painful. After that appointment, I talked to myself that I would never come back again. That’s just so embarrassing. I can’t even say the whole sentences, then how can I read my paper? I felt so embarrassed.” In her initial session, Helen was so frustrated she could not read her own paper that she sat during the whole session silently. For this reason, she decided not to visit the Writing Center because of her embarrassment during her initial session.

However, Helen’s description of her later sessions was very different from that of her initial session’s account. She said:

That girl, she couldn’t really give me some structural criticism because of the different fields; she was struggling with that and I was struggling with her as well. I knew it was a little mean thing to say, but I noticed that if I kept working with her, I couldn’t really improve, my writing is not just because of the grammar issue, it’s because of the structure, that sort of thing. So, I asked to change my tutor.
As seen from her response above, Helen continued coming to the Center despite her embarrassment in the initial session. Due to her frequent visits to the Center, Helen internalized some knowledge about academic writing and started to analyze the effectiveness of the assistance she was getting from a session. Thus, she perceived that the new tutor was not providing the assistance as well as the tutor with whom she had previously worked. Helen’s behavior clearly demonstrated the fact that she learned how to advocate for herself.

Farhad’s responses were similar to Helen’s descriptions of her initial and later sessions: “In the first stage, I did not really, you know, differentiate between the native accents. So, I thought that anyone who went to this university spoke English better than me. I struggled to describe to tutors what was the paper, and it was so hard.” Due to his limited English language skills, Farhad could not tell whether the tutors were native speakers or not. Also, he struggled to explain the topic of his paper to the tutor. So, according to Farhad’s perception, the amount and the type of the talk during that session was not productive.

Farhad’s perception of tutoring sessions changed over time. Talking about his later session, he said:

I remember, I wrote about something [long pause], I believe the lesson plan. When I attended that [tutoring] session, the tutor treated me as a novice learner of English, saying, ‘Maybe change this, maybe change that.’ When I left that session, I just deleted everything. I realized that I didn’t need that guidance anymore, I could do now on my own. I feel myself more confident in the writing, and now I can say whether the tutors can help me the way I want them to. To be more specific, I can tell if it is academic assistance or not.

Farhad’s description of his initial tutorial interaction and the perception of his later tutoring session were obviously different from each other. Since Farhad was working with some tutors frequently, he could tell whether the session with a new tutor was effective. Farhad’s account of his later session showed that he did not see himself as passively listening to the tutor’s
advice or the one who struggled to explain his paper to the tutors anymore. His gradual improvement in writing made him become more confident in his writing abilities. For this reason, he was not willing to accept that tutor’s suggestions because, in his opinion, the feedback was not constructive. Similar to Helen, he was starting to advocate for himself as a scholar.

Maria also observed how the engagement in academic writing contributed to the change in her identity. She said:

I have ten publications in Spanish between conference papers, chapters of the books, and my own book. Now, I need to find a way where I can be myself in this language because I have been divided by this proficient writer in Spanish and this writer in English. And I am trying to put those two together.

Maria had extensive experience with scholarly writing in Spanish, as she had published several articles in her country. Currently, she was working on how to better express herself in academic writing in English. For this reason, she wanted to combine her two identities as a writer so she could develop her own voice even when writing in English.

Describing his initial sessions, Mohamed noted, “I did not like explaining something because no matter how hard I try they seemed they did not understand what’s your paper is about.” In contrast, commenting on his later sessions, Mohamed said, “I asked the tutor not to skip the problems that I had because I noticed that she kept ignoring to address some obvious problems in my paper.”

A comparison of Mohamed’s two statements clearly demonstrates his gradual advancement in speaking and writing skills because in his initial sessions he thought he could not articulate the help he needed, but after frequent visits, he started to understand the assistance he needed most. Therefore, he was frustrated when the tutor was not addressing some problems in
his paper. Recognizing this, he asked the tutor to focus on the sections of his paper in which he needed help, becoming a more active participant in the tutoring session.

**Telling Other Students**

As the students were growing as writers, some of them started recommending the Writing Center to others. It shows that they started becoming role models and guides for other students rather than the only ones who need help/advice. For example, Farhad mentioned how he started recommending the Writing Center to other students from Saudi Arabia after he became president of the SSA: “So the technique, you know, I have been teaching my people, ‘You have to sign, like, in this week, you have to sign like two sessions with two different people and next week like with two different people.’” After working with different tutors at the Writing Center, Farhad came to realize that each tutor has a different style of working, so one negative experience did not mean that all tutors were alike. Therefore, sharing his experience with the Center, he recommended to Saudi students to work with two different tutors each week and then choose the tutors whose styles they liked most.

Several other students also started recommending the Writing Center to other international students. For instance, the students from Latin American countries (Antonio, Maria, and Valeria) mentioned that in their recommendations they highlighted the assistance they got in terms of improving their writing.

Bao mentioned that the Chinese students shared their academic experiences, including with the Writing Center, using chat groups. Therefore, he recommended that if the Writing Center staff had information about upcoming workshops, it could be better done by contacting
them through the Chinese Student Association because the president of the association would have then shared that information through the chat group.

As seen from the participants’ responses, the students started coming to the Center not only to get assistance with their papers but also with scholarly writing. Tutoring sessions helped them become more proficient in their scholarly writing by finding their own voices as writers. Since the students received both academic and nonacademic support by visiting the Center, these students shared information about their experiences with the Writing Center.

Writing Center as a Place for Academic Socialization and Beyond

Students in this study mentioned that they saw the Writing Center as a place for socializing academically and practicing their speaking skills. As mentioned in Chapter 2, academic socialization refers to a student’s understanding of the expectations of academic discourse and research. Academic socialization can take place both inside and outside of classroom settings when the students interact with their professors or peers (Duff, 2010; Reinhardt & Chen, 2013).

Academic Socialization

The participants in this study had limited experiences understanding the expectations of academic discourse and research. For this reason, they needed assistance in learning about the expectations of academic discourse and how to engage in scholarly research. When tutors could provide such assistance, the students noted they learned a lot about expectations of academic writing in their disciplines.
Learning about scholarly research. Students shared their experiences with learning how to engage in scholarly research. Some tutors could provide such assistance. For example, Maria mentioned that through a tutor from the Writing Center she learned about academic research. She noted:

She really helped me not only with the writing, she was teaching me also how to use the resources of the library. She was explaining me how to use databases; she was explaining me how to do the research literature because she’s a PhD student and she knows these kinds of things.

Maria underscored the fact that the tutoring session not only helped her improve her writing but also was beneficial to learn about conducting research. The tutor gave Maria helpful tips on how to use research databases. Maria appreciated the tutor’s assistance so that she could learn more about academic research.

I had a chance to observe one of Maria’s sessions with her tutor. Maria was working on a research paper that she wanted to submit to a conference. She had many ideas for the topic of the paper, and she needed assistance for choosing the right topic. By asking many questions, the tutor helped her narrow down her topic and also gave tips on organizing her thoughts in the paper. During the session, the tutor explained how to properly use political terms in her text. This assistance on the tutor’s part attests to the fact the Writing Center helps students socialize into their academic disciplines and become better writers in their fields.

Detailing how the academic socialization was beneficial for him, Raj said, “The tutor showed me how to search for literature, you know, using ERIC, for example.” Similar to Maria, Raj got assistance with conducting academic research. The assistance he received went beyond writing and helped him become a more effective researcher.

Learning about the expectations of academic writing. Some students mentioned how tutors helped them understand the expectations of academic writing. Ali said, “She was kind of like
familiar about economics, vocabulary that we use.” In Ali’s case, the tutor’s knowledge of economics helped him understand the appropriate use of essential vocabulary in writing in his field of study. Thus, the Writing Center experience helped Ali better understand the expectations of the academic writing in his discipline.

Helen liked the idea of getting feedback from tutors who were unfamiliar with her field. She said:

I come to the Center to run the ideas by tutors to make sure they understand. So that’s really helpful when tutors who are from different backgrounds can give me a suggestion on how to explain this to the people outside of my field so they can understand what I am talking about.

Helen shared how tutors helped her better express herself in writing. Since tutors were outside of her field of study, their recommendations were beneficial because, by explaining her ideas to the tutors, she was making sure people who were unfamiliar with her field could understand the essence of her thoughts.

In this regard, Lian said, “They give advice on how to ask a question from professors, tell me how to write an email and things like that. I feel like they gave me a lot of help.” As Lian mentioned, in addition to improving her writing skills, she learned on how to socialize academically with professors because the tutors taught her how to ask professors appropriate questions and how to write professional emails. Therefore, she appreciated the assistance that the tutors provided.

In sum, the students discussed how tutors’ knowledge of academic research and their ability to teach the expectations of academic discourse helped them socialize academically by understanding what was needed to interact with members of their academic community.
Opportunities for Interacting with Native Speakers and Getting Nonacademic Support

In addition to improving students’ writing skills, the Writing Center served as a place where they could practice their speaking skills, thus socializing outside of their academic disciplines. This socialization helped students’ holistic development, especially when the tutors acted as cultural informants.

Improving Speaking Skills

Some students mentioned that they visited the Writing Center to talk to native speakers. For instance, Helen noted:

My international friends say that, ‘Oh, you have to improve your English by talking to, or hanging out with American friends so that, that can help you to develop your speaking skills.’ But that’s just not my nature. So, I know if I go to the Writing Center, I get a chance to talk to a native speaker.

As Helen mentioned, international students were recommending talking or spending time with American people to improve her speaking skills. However, Helen was too shy to speak to American people, so for her, it was better to come to the Writing Center and interact with American tutors, as they were native speakers.

Another participant, Mohamed shared:

Sometimes, when you explain your paper, you found that the person does not get an idea what you are talking about. So, you try to change your words or your sentence and improve your speaking. Besides, you know, my wife, sometimes she wants to speak to other people. So, it is helpful for her to like speaking with people over there.

Mohamed noticed that when he talked to the tutors, he could improve not only his writing but also his speaking skills. When the tutors did not understand the assistance he needed, he was using different words to make his ideas clearer to the tutor, thereby improving his speaking
skills. Besides, Mohamed recommended his wife (who is also a graduate student at PUM) should visit the Center to improve her speaking skills.

Rabia also saw the Writing Center as a place to practice her speaking skills: “I go to the Center so that I can improve my English speaking because when I go to the university and listen to the lecture, I don’t speak to anyone. I want to speak with someone.” Rabia mentioned that she did not have a chance to socialize with other students at the university. For this reason, she went the Writing Center to talk to someone and improve her writing skills.

Bao also saw the Writing Center as a place for improving his speaking skills. He described it in the following way:

We have two American students in our Department. They are busy and don’t stay in the office long, we don’t have a chance to talk face-to-face. Sometimes, we need to practice speaking. For example, the pronunciation, as I realized that my pronunciation is not correct, that I realized. Actually, at the beginning I was coming to the Center to pass the speaking test because as an international TA [teaching assistant] we have to take that test.

Bao mentioned that he did not have a chance to talk to American teaching assistants in his department because they did not stay in their offices for a long time. For this reason, he could not interact face-to-face with his American peers to practice his speaking skills. The Writing Center was a good place for Bao to improve his pronunciation and speaking skills because as an international TA, he needed to pass a speaking test.

Learning About American Culture

A few students mentioned that during tutoring sessions, some tutors provided information about American culture. For example, Helen shared her experience learning about American culture in the following way:
Sometimes I would bring in a one-page paper and we finished it in less than 30 minutes. So, I used to prepare the list of questions that I had from my observation of environment, the school, American people’s behavior or some other things. And then I would bring those questions to the session. For example, I asked the tutor, “Why do American people take a shower in the morning?” Because in Taiwan, we take shower in the evening.

As Helen noted, sometimes she would bring a one-page paper to the sessions. Those sessions usually ended early, and to fill the remaining time, Helen used to prepare a list of questions about American culture or life. Those questions that she wanted to ask the tutors were not related to her academic paper. Before coming to the Center, she would ask the questions to better understand American people’s behavior and their daily lives.

Bao also noted, “We may not understand American culture. So, they help me with that.” Since Bao had a lack of knowledge about American culture, he appreciated the tutors’ help in understanding the American culture.

As seen from the students’ responses, some students in this study described the Writing Center as a place for practicing speaking skills by interacting with native-speaker tutors. Moreover, during tutoring sessions, they had an opportunity to talk to tutors and ask questions about the American culture, seeing tutors as cultural informants. This was because these students had limited opportunities to talk to their American peers outside of the classroom. Findings from the new coaches’ blog demonstrated that tutors were aware of the fact they could be perceived by ESL/international students as “cultural informants.” They shared in the blog about their willingness to act as cultural informants if international students asked questions about American cultural practices.
Social Support and Building Confidence

Some students mentioned that the social support they received during tutoring sessions was very important for them, as they felt it motivated them to improve their writings, thereby building their confidence. For example, Annisa said, “Warm and always a positive motivation. The tutor says, ‘You can do it, you’re almost done with your dissertation.’ Once she said that, it was comforting. I believed that I could do it.” As seen from Annisa’s description, she really appreciated the tutor’s motivation during tutoring sessions. Getting such encouragement helped her ease stress and motivated her to finish her dissertation.

In my observation of Annisa’s session, the tutor was very friendly and used the words that made Annisa laugh. For example, the tutor used some idioms (e.g., Oreo cookie) and kept joking and saying, “It is a lame word, but it works.”

Valeria also saw the benefit of getting a social support from a tutor. She said:

For me, it’s the emotional part. Sometimes you feel so frustrated with papers that you come here, and you ask them, “Do you think this is clear? Do you think it’s good?” And they were telling me like, “This is great. This is really cool. You’re doing a great job.” And that made me feel better about myself.

Valeria also appreciated hearing encouraging words from the tutor. As a graduate student, she was overwhelmed by her academic course load. For this reason, she came to the Center to get some assistance with her papers. In addition to getting assistance with her papers, the tutors supported her emotionally, which made her feel confident about her writing.

When I observed Valeria’s two sessions with her tutors, I heard the tutors’ encouraging words, such as, “Cool, I love it!” Valeria’s session with a Spanish-speaking tutor was especially interesting. Valeria brought a paper in Spanish to get help with the clarity of her Spanish text. Both tutor and Valeria were laughing when reading aloud a text in Spanish. From my
observations, Valeria got social support from both tutors, as the tutors were helping her build confidence as a writer.

As seen from the responses of the students, students received both academic and non-academic support by visiting the Center. Therefore, these students shared information about their experiences with the Writing Center and recommended the services to other students or their close friends.

It is worth mentioning that in terms of navigating academic support services, students were being persistent in following their professors’ recommendations about visiting the Writing Center to improve their writing skills. Some students benefitted from their international friends’ experiences who shared about the academic and nonacademic support they got at the Writing Center. In either case, international doctoral students were showing commitment to being a member of the academic community. They were advocating for themselves, acting as agents who were interested in improving their writing skills and at the same time to grow as scholars in their respective disciplines.

**Summary of Findings of Research Question 2**

As seen in the findings obtained from interviews, observations, and artifacts, international doctoral students’ experiences with the Writing Center were complex. By learning about the Writing Center at PUM, mainly through their professors, their Writing Center experiences positively affected these students’ academic experiences.

As a result of their frequent visits to the Writing Center, these students developed ongoing relationships with their tutors. At the same time, they observed how their identities as writers have changed. The Writing Center experience was experiential learning for them, as the
tutors offered hands-on opportunities to hone their writing and research skills, helped the students put ideas into practice, showcased their achievements to their professors, and joined academic discourse communities through writing. As a result of their ongoing visits, they were also experiencing holistic development and were improving their writing skills and socializing academically and nonacademically due to the comfortable environment provided by the Writing Center tutors. The students also shared information about the Writing Center with other students about their experiences with the Writing Center.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from interviews, observations, and artifacts. The themes in relation to the first research question helped me understand how students described their interactions with tutors. As a result of frequent visits, these students developed ongoing relationships with their tutors. To describe these relationships, they used phrases such as “close bonding” or they highlighted the skills and personality of tutors that impacted their preference for working with the same tutors.

In regard to the second research question, the themes generated from the findings were multilayered, detailing how the Writing Center experience contributed to international doctoral students’ overall academic experiences. The contribution of the Writing Center to the academic experiences of students was largely influenced by the tutoring relationships and the environment the tutors created.

Findings from this doctoral study revealed that writing centers, as academic resources, can improve international doctoral students’ writing abilities. At the same time, writing centers
can serve as a bridge toward greater academic success for the students, contributing to positive academic experiences of students at U.S. higher education institutions.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this qualitative case study revealed that international doctoral students had different perceptions of their tutorial interactions during their initial and later sessions at the Writing Center. As mentioned in Chapter 4, different experiences with tutoring sessions contributed to these students’ perceptions of their initial interactions being either positive or negative. However, after working with many tutors at the Writing Center, the students preferred working with the same tutors, as they started building the long-term relationships with the tutors. When the students commented about how their Writing Center experiences influenced their overall academic experiences at PUM, they brought up many examples that helped me understand how their academic experiences were shaped through their visits to the Writing Center.

Discussion of Findings Pertaining to Research Question 1

Findings regarding the first research question revealed that the international doctoral students had different perceptions of their initial tutorial interactions shaped by their English language proficiency, the tutor’s ability to work with ESL clients, and their expectations of the tutoring session. Their perceptions were drawn mainly from the talk or dialogue between the students and their tutors.
In this study, students’ initial interactions with tutors and the dialogue between them and tutors were perceived either negatively or positively. For instance, eight students described that they were dissatisfied either with the talk or the interactions during their initial sessions, whereas nine students reported positive impressions from their initial tutoring sessions.

The students who reported dissatisfaction had language challenges, which hampered their ability to explain the assistance they expected from the tutoring sessions. Therefore, they felt the tutors were dominating the sessions and deciding the level of assistance the students needed. As the students could not explain what kind of assistance they needed, they left the sessions feeling disappointed. The finding regarding English language challenges of international students is consistent with existing studies (e.g., Halic et al., 2009; Nakamaru, 2010). The international students’ low proficiency in English can cause challenges in asking for feedback from tutors at writing centers, as found by Nakamura (2010) or more generally when seeking assistance with their academic tasks from American peers or tutors (Halic et al., 2009).

When describing their negative perceptions of the initial tutoring session, the students said their expectations from tutoring sessions were not met because they needed more assistance from tutors. Much research indicates that international students expect more from tutoring sessions than American students do (e.g., Hirschhorn, 2007; Mazen, 2018). International students expect assistance not only with grammar but also help with higher order concerns, such as feedback on cohesion and clarity of the paper that goes beyond addressing grammar and punctuation (Hirschhorn, 2007).

Unfamiliarity with the U.S. academic writing requirements also contributed to some students’ dissatisfaction with their initial sessions. As other studies (e.g., Kuo, 2011; Mazen, 2018) found, my findings also indicated some international graduate students’ writing challenges
were mainly due to their unfamiliarity with the differences in the standards for their language and American academic writing styles, causing frustration for international graduate students in their attempt to meet the expectations of graduate-level courses.

Additionally, when describing her dissatisfaction with her initial tutorial interaction, a student from Saudi Arabia shared a feeling of being discriminated against. Some scholars (e.g., Beoku-Betts, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; Modir & Kia-Keating, 2018) discussed that in addition to academic challenges, international students reported high levels of perceived discrimination due to their cultural background, particularly students from Middle Eastern countries.

In contrast, many of the participants reported positive perceptions of tutorial interactions during their initial sessions. Their positive perceptions were mainly drawn from the talk that occurred between them and the conducive environment for learning. Much research (e.g., Mazen, 2018; North, 1984) indicates collaborative dialogue or talk is the essential method of the writing center pedagogy, as it plays an important role in creating a conducive environment for student learning.

The students had positive perceptions of those tutorial interactions even though they did not contribute much to the tutoring sessions. In their cases, the tutors were aware of the lack of language skills and facilitated the sessions so that it could turn into a learning process despite the students’ limited participation in the sessions. When tutors are aware of international students’ language challenges and facilitate the sessions accordingly, students perceive those sessions as positive (Kim, 2018). Additionally, in my study, some students remained silent during sessions and/or did not contribute much to the session, but still the students perceived those sessions as conducive to learning. Relevant studies (e.g., Rafoth, 2015; Thonus, 2015) also found that even
though multilingual students often remained silent during tutoring sessions, they learned through those interactions.

As seen in my findings, the tutors understood the language challenges of these students. Even though the students perceived themselves to be passive in initial sessions, they still benefitted from interactions because the tutors’ feedback helped them improve their writing skills. Much research (e.g., Blau & Hall, 2002; Kim, 2018; Terui, 2012) also reported the limitations of the interactions and participation of some international students in the tutoring processes due to their proficiency in academic language, and tutors were helpful in identifying those challenges and providing help accordingly.

**Vygotsky’s Concept of the Zone of Proximal Development**

Vygotsky (1978) coined the term “zone of proximal development”(ZPD) to explain "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In the zone of proximal development, interactions with or contributions of others serve as a medium for learning, and in this learning process, the knowledgeable peer serves as a "facilitator or provider of assistance" for the other student’s knowledge development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 448). The guidance or assistance is provided through scaffolded feedback to enhance the student knowledge gradually.

ZPD provides a conceptual model for tutors to support language learners to understand and manage the proper use of certain language forms (Nordlof, 2014). Scaffolded feedback provided by tutors helps enhance knowledge of ESL students about U.S. academic English, and when the students master such knowledge, there will be no need for scaffolding (Mazen, 2018).
So, in the context of writing centers, social interactions of the ESL writers contribute to improving writing skills in English (Nordlof, 2014). Since knowledge is created through social interaction, then the relationship between (ESL) student and tutor during the sessions should incorporate directive and scaffolded feedback (Mazen, 2018).

Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) aligns with many themes, such as effective feedback, preference for working with the same tutors, and expectations for future tutoring sessions. Specifically, the concept of ZPD serves as the theoretical basis for explaining how effective feedback facilitated these students’ learning. When describing the effective feedback provided by tutors, many students discussed how tutors provided step-by-step guidance that helped improve their writing skills.

In the writing center context, the ZPD concept is used with the notion of scaffolding, which refers to tutors’ supportive behaviors as experts by helping novice learners achieve higher levels of learning (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Mazen, 2018). In my study, the international graduate students reported benefitting from tutoring sessions through scaffolding strategies practiced by knowledgeable and skillful tutors through asking questions and then teaching the knowledge that the students lacked. Several studies (e.g., Chang, 2011; Mazen, 2018; Rafoth, 2015) examined the effectiveness of the tutoring sessions from the perspective of ESL/international graduate students. When tutors could meet the students’ expectations, the students perceived the sessions as positive (Chang, 2011; Mazen, 2018). The tutors’ understanding of the linguistic challenges of international students and teaching them the rules of academic writing by providing scaffolded feedback that fell within the realm of ZPD contributed to satisfaction with the tutoring sessions (Chang, 2011).
The reasons the students preferred to work with the same tutors and developed good relationships also align with Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD concept. My study findings also indicated that participants welcomed the feedback given by tutors, as they noticed it was helpful for improving their writing. When the feedback was given by peers, the students perceived it as improving their intellectual development (Vygotsky, 1978). Likewise, if the international students perceived assistance from tutors as a knowledge-building process, they tended to keep friendly relationships with those tutors (Mazen, 2018; Nordlof, 2014). Thus, the learning process at writing centers viewed through the lens of ZPD helped explain how internalization of language forms and the intellectual growth of students happened during the tutoring sessions with the help of tutors.

My findings also revealed that skillful and knowledgeable tutors helped the students become better writers; thus, many students developed long-term relationships with those tutors. When the tutors meet students’ expectations during the sessions, in the long term, those interactions can turn into a positive relationship between a tutor and a student (Thonus, 2015). Therefore, any type of interaction at the writing center should be seen as “the lifeblood of learning” (Rafoth, 2015, p.41).

Several students in this study also highlighted that in future tutoring sessions they expected the tutors to be knowledgeable in teaching the necessary skills so they could learn more about academic writing. This finding also runs parallel with Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD concept, supporting that the knowledge transmitted by peers/experts promotes learning. Research reports international students’ desires for tutors to be knowledgeable (e.g., Carter-Tod, 1995; Vallejo, 2004). International students expect tutors to be as knowledgeable as their professors and
transmit knowledge to them by providing constructive feedback during the sessions (Vallejo, 2004).

Some students shared that the personal characteristics of tutors, such as being non-judgmental, would be beneficial for creating conducive environments for learning. Studies (e.g., Davis, 2006; Mazen, 2018) have found that tutors should create friendly environments by instilling trust and confidence in the international students rather than making them uncomfortable about their writing challenges.

**Summary**

Overall, my findings regarding international students’ interactions with tutors support existing literature on the experiences of international students at U.S. higher education institutions. The tutors’ knowledge and skills to teach the rules of U.S. academic writing were an important component of making the interactions positive. The friendly atmosphere the tutors created worked for the benefit of the participants in my study, as they could internalize those rules and improve their writing. Analyzing the international doctoral students’ preference for working with the same tutors through the lens of Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD concept helped me understand how the students obtained knowledge from their interactions with tutors and built long-term relationships with tutors.

**Discussion of Findings Pertaining to Research Question 2**

The second research question examined how the writing center experiences of these students contributed to their overall academic experiences at PUM. The majority of students in this study noted that their professors introduced them to the Writing Center, helping them make
the first steps in their academic progress. In that case, the Writing Center was perceived as an extension of classes where they could get academic support to improve their grades. The findings also revealed that the writing center experience contributed to the students’ academic experiences in many ways, such as providing an opportunity to grow as scholars and improve their writing skills as well as serving as a place for academic socialization and getting a social support.

Much research (e.g., Banjong, 2015; Kuo, 2011) indicates that international students encounter challenges adjusting to the American higher education system and class expectations due to their lack of English language proficiency. My findings also indicated that these international doctoral students struggled to cope with challenges of academic writing and meeting course requirements due to their lack of writing skills. Their professors saw their struggle, and therefore, they recommended visiting the Writing Center. When the students visited the Writing Center after following professors’ recommendations, they reported that such visits positively impacted their academic outcomes, paralleling research that shows when professors refer students to the Writing Center, international students have positive academic experiences (Hall, 2013; Sherry et al., 2010).

Situated Learning Theory and Community of Practice

In their book, Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as a process where novice learners acquire knowledge through the help of experts. The situated learning framework that they propose in that book views any learning activity, such as a writing activity, as a situated process in which interactions with knowledgeable people shape novice learners’ experiences (Colombo, 2011). In this regard,
learning that occurs as a collaboration with those experts is defined as a legitimate peripheral participation (LPP; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through the lens of LPP, engagement with experts is essential as newcomers explore a community of practice and form an understanding of that community (Colombo, 2011). However, this process is not simple because it entails the development or change of identities through learners’ continuous efforts to obtain a central role in the CoP, suggesting that membership in CoPs is not a stable process; in contrast, it is always changing based on the learners’ reproduction of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, situated learning theory’s LPP implies that members who engage in learning activities obtain knowledge on "a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, [and] ways of addressing recurring problems" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 47).

Several themes of this study are aligned with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory and its associated concepts of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) and community of practice (CoP). Due to their frequent visits to the Writing Center, the students noticed the enhancement of their knowledge regarding U.S. academic rhetoric. Through one-to-one tutoring, the students received feedback from the tutors, and therefore, they formed positive perceptions of the tutoring sessions, showing the positive results of tutoring. One-to-one positive tutoring sessions’ contribution to students’ academic success is best explained by Lave and Wenger’s situated learning theory (Lerner, 2007). Specifically, situated learning theory helps us understand how writing centers benefit from the opportunity of demonstrating how learning occurs through tutoring sessions. When looking at the role of writing centers through the lens of situated learning, the center reflects the teaching and learning goals of the institution in which it operates (Lerner, 2007; Nordlof, 2014). In my case study, the participants perceived the Writing Center as
a place for learning about the expectations of American academic writing, interacting with native speakers, and improving their writing skills.

While improving their writing, the students noticed their identities as writers and learners were changing as well. The changing identities through participation in tutoring sessions aligns with concepts central to situated learning theory (Lerner, 2007). Students in my study reported that changing identities happened when they became more knowledgeable by participating in tutoring sessions. “Knowing” is the main constituent of relationships among members of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 157). In this study, participants were motivated to learn more; thus, they were building knowledge and connections with members of the academic community of their institutions. To explain how learning through the “rich notion of agency” evolves, Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 53) developed a notion of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), which views learning as a contextual social phenomenon achieved through participation in a community practice. My findings indicated that the students were keen to learn more and improve their writing, thereby showing commitment to becoming a member of the knowledge community.

To be more specific, the students were initially passive participants in tutoring sessions, meaning that they were participating in the academic community of practice of their institutions by staying in the periphery of the community. Tutorial interactions helped these international students to join the community of practice by gradually enhancing their knowledge about writing, academic culture, and research. However, the students’ persistence in joining the community of practice helped them move from the periphery. This finding shows an alignment with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) changing roles in the CoP. If novice learners demonstrate commitment to the community of practice “in its unfolding, multidimensional complexity”
(Wenger, 1998, p. 95), they claim a central role in membership in the community of practice. By practicing “a rich notion of agency,” the learners aim for full participation in a community of practice, and in fact, full participation means moving from periphery to the center, where learners see their roles as an “evolving form of [their] membership” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53).

As these students continuously engaged with members of the academic community, i.e., tutors, they were acting as active agents because they claimed a central role in the community. Gaining knowledge through interactions means to participate centrally in the community of practice of the institution; however, this knowledge also contributes to concomitant changes in identities (Lerner, 2007). In this regard, my findings indicated that the students saw the Writing Center as a steppingstone to join their institutions of academic community of practice because they lacked interactions with their American peers and other members of the academic community. The majority of my participants in this study, except the students from Pakistan and India, were from non-English speaking, non-Western countries, and therefore, they felt like outsiders to the U.S. academic discourse. “ESL students are often marginalized in their disciplines, whose power is associated with the English language and western communities” (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 38) because Western academic communities of practice remain closed for ESL students. One of the gateways for these students to join to this community is to engage in scholarly writing (Canagarajah, 2002). However, for the participants in my study, this process did not involve the mere acceptance of Western norms of writing; instead, it became a complex process due to the international graduate students’ educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. By displaying their acceptance or resistance to the tutors’ advice, the international graduate students’ participation in the community of practice turned into a process of negotiating
cultures and/or power. Relevant research also reported the complex process of international students’ (multilingual writers) acceptance and participation in communities of practice (e.g., Canagarajah, 2002; Morita, 2004).

The concepts of CoP and LPP helped explain how the international graduate students moved from the peripheral to full participation in their university’s academic community. In this transitioning process, effective tutorial interactions were vital to the students’ development of their academic writing skills because by interacting with the tutors – i.e., with more experienced community members – they moved to the center of the CoP. Research (e.g., Jones, 2017; Mazen, 2018) has also indicated that international graduate students reported their changing identities by becoming active participants in the tutoring sessions, thereby contributing more to the dialogue between them and the tutors. During effective tutoring processes, students not only learn from social and tutorial interactions but also develop their identities as emerging scholars in their disciplines (Ede, 1989; Jones, 2017).

Many students in this study mentioned that at the Writing Center they enjoyed talking to the native speakers, getting feedback on their papers, discussing broader issues of research, and learning about U.S. culture and academic discourse. Certain academic social spaces are vital for academic language socialization of ESL students, and by participating in those spaces, they joined the community of practice (Soltani, 2018). Moreover, through academic socialization, the international students gain knowledge by learning about the norms, expectations, and appropriate behaviors of an academic community (Colombo, 2011; Murshidi, 2014) because academic social spaces build on the concepts of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this study, the international ESL students acted as apprentice scholars by socializing academically in the academic social space, the Writing Center at PUM, and by learning the expected norms of
academic writing and research from tutors, they moved to the center of their institutions’ academic community. Research (e.g., Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Gard, 2017) has examined the development of research literacies of international students. My findings also reported that international doctoral students gained knowledge about academic research and discipline-specific writing. Doctoral students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds benefit from participation in tutorial sessions and develop their research literacies (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016). Moreover, academic socialization at the Writing Center contributed to knowledge building while accomplishing tasks relevant to the graduate students’ fields of study (Gard, 2017). Thus, a university writing center can play an important role in the socialization of graduate students through writing by helping them develop as experts in their respective disciplines.

In addition to improving their writing skills, the Writing Center helped these students socialize outside academia. The students frequently visited the Writing Center to practice their speaking skills, as it provided an opportunity to interact with native speakers. Writing centers serve as a source of socialization to practice speaking skills because international students have less interaction with their American peers (Murshidi, 2014).

The participants also commented on the tutors’ ability to provide helpful suggestions regarding the U.S. culture or academic discourse. Research (e.g., Kuo, 2011; Mazen, 2018) found that when international graduate students interacted with native speakers they could develop better understanding of the U.S. education system and culture. Therefore, tutors should act as cultural informants to make tutorial interactions more effective for international students (Mazen, 2018).
The students in this study also noted that they frequently visited the Writing Center at PUM to receive some social and emotional support from their peer tutors, as it promoted learning in a friendly environment. During tutoring sessions, social interaction plays a major role for students (Ede, 1989); therefore, tutors should aspire to instill confidence and encourage students to become better writers (Davis, 2006).

International students tend to rely heavily on social support as they transition to higher education in the U.S. (Myles & Cheng, 2003; Okuda & Anderson, 2018; Sümer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). Therefore, developing support services for international graduate students at U.S. higher education institutions in academic social spaces, such as writing centers, can reduce their stress associated with academic challenges (Okuda & Anderson, 2018; Sümer et al., 2008).

In sum, the findings of my case study are consistent with the relevant literature because when tutors acted as cultural informants and helped the students socialize both academically and nonacademically, the students in this study perceived those sessions as conducive to learning and effective in coping with their academic challenges.

Some students noted that when they faced academic challenges, they contacted the students from their own countries, thus forming informal academic communities. An informal academic community is an autonomous and nonacademic context that teaches its community members essential knowledge (Cho, 2016). In those communities, the students shared with each other their experiences with using academic resources at PUM, including the Writing Center. Several studies discussed international students’ communities of practice (e.g., Colombo, 2011; Deem & Brehony 2000; Dong, 1998; Guilfoyle, 2005). International students’ informal communities of practice serve for them as places for learning academic cultural practices and expanding intellectual networks (Deem & Brehony 2000).
Studies (e.g., Colombo, 2011; Starfield, 2010) also indicate that international doctoral students’ exchange of academic information in their relational communities is valuable because it demonstrates the students’ attempt to build doctoral communities (Starfield, 2010). Therefore, in this study, understanding the international graduate students’ social relations with other students, such as their exchange of information about accessing writing resources on campus, was essential because it provided insight into the purpose of their communities of practice as well as their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with academic resources on campus.

Summary

The Writing Center made significant contributions to the international doctoral students’ academic experiences. The students not only developed their writing skills, but they also could see their growth as scholars in their respective disciplines. These students did not have many opportunities to socialize with their American peers; therefore, they benefitted from the social interactions and both academic and nonacademic conversations that took place in the Writing Center. The Writing Center experience also helped these students join the academic community of practice through their tutoring sessions. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) community of practice concept was appropriate to understand these students’ transitions, i.e., moving from periphery to the center of the CoP. This process was possible through the students’ learning experiences from tutorial interactions at the Writing Center. Moreover, the exchange of information about the Writing Center fostered the further holistic and academic development of the international students’ own CoPs, helping these students cope with academic challenges and seek support from one another.
In sum, socialization in an academic space, in this case at the Writing Center, helped them build knowledge about the expectations for academic writing and join the community of practice in their institution as they had access to shared knowledge among academic community members through the tutors. During tutoring sessions, for some students, the Writing Center served both as academic and social space, helping them interact with native speakers and improve their speaking skills. Socialization in social spaces, in students’ own CoPs – i.e., outside academic spaces – helped them understand the expansion of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) idea of community of practice in informal settings.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Findings revealed that tutoring sessions with international doctoral students went beyond regular sessions for getting assistance with their graduate writings. These students experienced development in their identities as scholars through socializing in tutoring sessions and improving their writing skills. As there are only a handful of studies that discuss international graduate students’ changing identities through improvement of their writing skills, future research needs to look at the ways writing centers can support international graduate students, particularly doctoral students, in developing their identities as scholars. In the same vein, research should also consider the potential of writing centers for promoting students’ inclusion into an academic community of practice.

Since my study did not examine how writing center experiences differed due to the ethnicity or nationality of the participants, future research should consider how race/ethnicity influence writing center experiences. Future studies should also consider tutors’ perspectives of the tutor-tutee relationship. Such research could provide more insight into how tutors perceive
that relationship and highlight additional misunderstandings that may exist in that relationship, especially related to unmet expectations, as indicated in my findings. International undergraduate students’ experiences with writing centers should also be examined in future research because they may have different expectations than their graduate counterparts.

**Recommendations for Improving Services for International Doctoral Students**

As many students were dissatisfied with their initial sessions due to unbalanced power relationships, unmet expectations, and miscommunications, my study indicates a need for additional training for tutors to prepare them for effective interactions with international graduate students. Such training should include information on how to support students who are struggling to explain the assistance they need or who remain silent during sessions. Students’ behaviors during the sessions may stem from their culture, so being aware of cultural factors that influence the specific behaviors would be beneficial for tutors. Specific training on multicultural issues would also help minimize the tutors’ biases toward international students, thereby helping avoid perceived discrimination on students’ part.

Some students also had negative perceptions of tutoring sessions because they had unrealistic expectations, such as editing their long papers during a one-hour session. To address students’ unrealistic expectations, the Writing Center could post a little introduction video or some information on the website that explains how the Writing Center works and what can be expected in a session. Tutors may also repeat that information at the beginning of the first tutoring session and check in with the student to make sure the services they offer align with what they need.
Moreover, international students may not be comfortable sharing feedback about their tutoring session with Writing Center leadership or may not know who to talk to; that’s why we need anonymous online evaluations of tutoring sessions. This will improve the quality of tutoring sessions because tutors can get immediate feedback about their sessions.

Students in this study extensively talked about wanting to gain constructive feedback to improve their writing. As doctoral students, they need more assistance with their graduate level of writing; therefore, my study indicates a need for training tutors in effective tutoring strategies, such as scaffolding techniques, to meet the needs of this subpopulation of students.

By the same token, being doctoral students, these students also needed more time for tutoring sessions because one-hour tutoring sessions were not enough for them. Availability of at least two-hour tutoring sessions would be beneficial for these students to cope with the challenges of the intensive graduate level of academic writing. Therefore, my findings indicate a need for extended appointment time for the students in the same day.

Since these doctoral students were engaged in research and scholarly writing, they also expressed their desire to work with knowledgeable tutors. They expected to get assistance from tutors who can help them grow as scholars in their disciplinary writing. The Writing Center staff may consider posting on the Writing Center website the information about the tutors who are knowledgeable in different fields of study. To be more specific, the website of the Writing Center should include information about the tutors, such as their names, major, and level of study (undergraduate or graduate student). This information will help them make an appointment with the tutors who have some experience in their field of study. Information about tutors could also indicate areas that they are particularly good at (e.g., APA citations, grammar, sentence structure, or organization of papers), so students can select a tutor who meets their specific needs.
When discussing the negative perceptions with their initial tutoring sessions, the students mentioned undergraduate student tutors’ lack of skills in providing feedback on graduate-level writing. In my experience working at the Writing Center as a tutor for three years, I know that all tutors undergo training on how to effectively work with ESL students, so undergraduate tutors should try to effectively practice the knowledge obtained from training by facilitating their sessions to meet the needs of international doctoral students. Experienced graduate tutors should observe new undergraduate student tutors’ sessions and provide feedback to train them for working with international students.

Students also talked about how the Writing Center was a place for them to practice speaking skills. This finding indicates a need for training of tutors in how to engage international students in small talk. Training should prepare tutors to serve as a speaking partner for international students when they need it. The Writing Center can offer training for tutors who are interested in serving as both tutors and conversation partners. In this way, the conversation partner and the international student can develop a tutoring relationship.

This research also has practical implications for developing writing center pedagogy and support programs to facilitate productive academic socialization. More robust academic writing support would be beneficial for improving access to and resources for diverse student populations and decrease attrition and time to degree completion for all students. Since undergraduate tutors could not provide adequate assistance for international graduate students, additional trainings are needed to prepare them to serve this population of students better. Particularly, the trainings can inform undergraduate tutors about diverse language and educational backgrounds of international students and their unfamiliarity with the requirements of U.S. academic rhetoric.
Conclusion

This study examined international doctoral students’ perspectives of their interactions with Writing Center tutors at PUM. Themes in relation to the first research question revealed that the international students’ initial experiences with the Writing Center tutors were both negative and positive. Reasons for the negative perceptions and dissatisfaction were mainly due to the students’ unmet expectations or an unbalanced power dynamic in the tutoring sessions. On the other hand, meeting students’ expectations of the sessions and the friendly atmosphere provided by tutors contributed to positive perceptions of tutorial interactions. Therefore, students’ preference for working with the same tutors was due to the friendly atmosphere provided by the tutors who helped them improve their writing skills. Students also expressed their expectations of future tutoring sessions, highlighting that knowledge and skills of tutors would be more beneficial for improving their writing.

Themes in relation to the second research question revealed the Writing Center was initially perceived as an extension of class by some students because a professor had encouraged them to visit the Writing Center to meet course expectations. Due to frequent visits to the Center, some students noticed changing identities and growth as scholars in their respective fields. For these students, the Writing Center at PUM also served as an academic space where they could socialize academically, learn about the expectations of academic writing, and expand their knowledge on academic research.

The positive perceptions of the international doctoral students’ tutorial interactions at the Writing Center are important as they affected their overall perception of academic experiences. The Writing Center served as the only academic support service for this population of students.
because they do not utilize other support services, such as academic advising. For this reason, the university should try to make the services provided by the Writing Center positive.

In sum, the presence of international students at American higher education institutions is important, as the students make a significant contribution to the U.S. economy. When the current administration of the United States decided to send international students back to their home countries due to COVID-19, many U.S. colleges and universities stood behind their thousands of international students. This public support underscores the fact that in addition to contributing billions of dollars annually to the country, international students were seen to serve as intellectual capital for the universities. If we value these students’ contributions to the U.S. education and economy, we need to provide the support they need to be successful in their academic programs. The writing center can be one of the resources that contributes to international students’ academic success, helping them become more confident writers and scholars.
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APPENDIX A

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
APPENDIX B

FLYER
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY
A qualitative case study: International graduate Students’ Interactions with their Writing Tutors and the Role of Writing Center in their Academic Experiences.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of the research is to examine international doctoral students’ interactions with tutors and to explore the role of the Writing Center in their academic experiences.

Note: a $20 Target gift card will be rewarded for your participation in the study.

Spring Semester 2020
APPENDIX C

STUDENT INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Dear (Student’s Full Name):

As a graduate student seeking a doctoral degree in the Counseling and Higher Education Department at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois, I am seeking volunteers to participate in my dissertation study titled: *A qualitative case study: International graduate Students’ Interactions with their Writing Tutors and the Role of Writing Center in their Academic Experiences.*

The purpose of the research is to examine international doctoral students’ interactions with tutors and to explore the role of the Writing Center in their academic experiences. I would like to invite you to participate in a 60-minute interview. Interview questions are related to your experiences with the Writing Center. In addition, I am asking permission to observe two of your sessions at the Writing Center.

If you agree, please sign the consent form and bring it to the pre-interview observation session. Please email me beforehand about the time of your session. As a compensation for your time, I am willing to provide a $20 Target gift card for your participation in the study.

If you are interested in participating or if you have any further questions about this study, please contact me via email [email] or my dissertation advisor Prof. Jeria at [email]. Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Sincerely,

Chynar Amanova
APPENDIX D
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FROM
I agree to participate in the research project titled: *A qualitative case study: International graduate Students’ Interactions with their Writing Tutors and the Role of Writing Center in their Academic Experiences* being conducted by Chynar Amanova, a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University.

I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to understand the role of the Writing Center in the academic experiences of international graduate students. I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: participate in a 60 minute in-person interview that will be audio-recorded. Interview questions will include questions about my perceptions of interaction with the writing tutors and the role of the Writing Center in my academic experience.

Additionally, the researcher is interested in observing my interactions with the writing tutor before and after the interview. Therefore, I agree to be observed during two sessions.

I have been informed that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time without prejudice and/or penalty. If I have additional questions about the study, I can contact: Chynar Amanova, [Z1803744@students.niu.edu](mailto:Z1803744@students.niu.edu) or Prof. Jorge Jeria, faculty advisor at [jjeria1@niu.edu](mailto:jjeria1@niu.edu). I understand that if I need further information about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the Office of Research Compliance [Office of Research Compliance](mailto:OfficeofResearchCompliance@niu.edu).

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include the opportunity to share my experiences with the Writing Center in a safe environment in addition to adding to the body of knowledge regarding international students studying in the United States.

I understand that the all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by securely maintaining all records and using pseudonyms. No identifying information will be reported or shared.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of participant

Date
APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Demographic Questions

- Which country are you from?
- What is your major?
- How do you identify your gender?
- What is your age?
- What is your marital status?
- Is your family with you in the United States?
- How far are you in your program?
- How did you learn about the Writing Center?
- At what point in your doctoral program, did you begin to visit the Writing Center?
- How often do you visit the Writing Center?

Main Part

1. Please talk a little bit about your general experiences with the Writing center.
   Probing question: What was it like to go to the Writing Center?

2. Prior to coming to the Center, what were your expectations of the Writing Center?

3. Try to remember back, what were your impressions of your first tutoring session?
   *What really stood out in the beginning?

4. If you did not receive the help you expected, what was your plan to find that help?

5. You shared that you visited the Writing Center X of times in Summer and/or Fall semesters of 2019. What are your motivations for coming to the Center on an occasional/frequent basis?

6. If you had the professor-referred visit, please compare it with the self-referred visit briefly.
7. What do you look for in a tutor – (personality, characteristics, skills)?

8. Do you usually see the same tutor? Or do you prefer to work with different tutors? Why do you go to the same tutor/different tutors?

9. Please describe the interactions that you have with the tutor(s).

10. In my observation, I noticed _____. Does that reflect your typical experience? Have you ever told another student about your experiences at the writing center? What did you tell that student?

11. In addition to getting assistance with your papers, what knowledge, if at all, do you gain about U.S. academic culture when you come to the Writing Center?

12. What suggestions do you have for improving writing support services for international doctoral students? Please be as detailed as possible.
APPENDIX F

PRE-OBSERVATION CONSENT FORM
I agree to participate in the research project titled: A qualitative case study: International graduate Students’ Interactions with their Writing Tutors and the Role of Writing Center in their Academic Experiences. being conducted by Chynar Amanova, a doctoral candidate at [Redacted].

I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to understand the role of the Writing Center in the academic experiences of international graduate students and to examine the dynamics of the interactions between tutor and tutee.

I give consent for the researcher to observe one or two my tutoring sessions with her research participants. I have also been informed that during observations, the focus will be on the interaction between the study participant and me.

I have been informed that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time without prejudice and/or penalty. If I have additional questions about the study, I can contact: Chynar Amanova, [Redacted] or Prof. Jorge Jeria, a faculty advisor at [Redacted]. I understand that if I need further information about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the Office of Research Compliance [Redacted].

I understand that the all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by securely maintaining all records and using pseudonyms. No identifying information will be reported or shared.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of tutor

_________________________________________  Date

_________________________________________  ___________________
APPENDIX G

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL
Date: __________________________

Start Time: ________________

End Time: ________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Observation Notes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Reflective Notes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactions between tutee and tutor:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of body language and demeanor of tutee (when they first greet the tutor):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How demeanor changed during the session?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the tutee seem receptive to the service being provided? Why or why not?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the tutee appear to be enjoying the interaction? Why or why not?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did the session end? Does tutee seem satisfied? Why? Why not?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H

TUTOR CONSENT FORM
I agree to participate in the research project titled: *A qualitative case study: International graduate Students’ Interactions with their Writing Tutors and the Role of Writing Center in their Academic Experiences.* being conducted by Chynar Amanova, a doctoral candidate at [Redacted].

I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to understand the role of the Writing Center in the academic experiences of international graduate students and to examine the dynamics of the interactions between tutor and tutee.

I give consent for the researcher to observe one or two my tutoring sessions with her research participants. I have also been informed that during observations, the focus will be on the interaction between the study participant and me.

I have been informed that my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time without prejudice and/or penalty. If I have additional questions about the study, I can contact: Chynar Amanova, [Redacted] or Prof. Jorge Jeria, faculty advisor at [Redacted]. I understand that if I need further information about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the Office of Research Compliance [Redacted].

I understand that the all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by securely maintaining all records and using pseudonyms. No identifying information will be reported or shared.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of tutor

Date