Beyond Tutor Talk: Understanding the Pedagogical Reasoning Behind Tutors' Responses to Student Writing Challenges

Brenda M. Wambua, Geoffrey Maroko, Larry Ndivo

Machakos University, Kenya

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000197

Received: 14 October 2026; Accepted: 20 October 2026; Published: 31 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Writing centre scholarship has established that tutors use instructional, cognitive, and motivational strategies to support student writers. This article focuses on tutors' explanations of why they select particular interventions to the writing challenges students present to them at the writing centre. The article examined the pedagogical reasoning underlying tutor responses in four university writing centres in Kenya. It focused on a qualitative descriptive study involving 12 naturally occurring tutorial sessions, 11 peer tutors, 12 first-year student writers, and 24 post-session interviews. Data was analysed thematically, with tutor talk interpreted through Mackiewicz and Thompson's (2015) framework of instructional, cognitive, and motivational scaffolding. Seven interrelated rationales emerged: fostering metacognitive awareness; promoting student ownership and autonomy; using dialogic questioning to develop critical thinking; affirming students to sustain confidence; demonstrating practical writing procedures; expanding ideas and critical depth; and integrating language development with writing instruction. The findings suggest that tutors' decisions were not simply corrective. Tutors sought to address immediate textual concerns while helping students recognise problems, reason through alternatives, and assume increasing responsibility for their writing. The article conceptualised these practices as calibrated scaffolding: the tutor adjusts the form and degree of support to the nature of the difficulty and the student's apparent needs. The study extends writing centre scholarship by bringing tutors' stated rationales into the analysis of tutoring and providing evidence from Kenyan university writing centres. Because the study did not longitudinally measure learning outcomes, it does not claim that the observed practices caused lasting improvement or transfer. Instead, it identifies the developmental purposes tutors attributed to their interventions and outlines implications for tutor education, writing centre design, and further research.

Keywords: Writing Centres; Tutor Talk; Peer Tutoring; Pedagogical Reasoning; Scaffolding; Student Autonomy; Metacognition; Academic Writing; Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is one of the principal means through which university students demonstrate knowledge, participate in disciplinary conversations, and develop an academic identity. It requires more than grammatically correct sentences. Students must interpret assignments, develop manageable topics, generate and organise ideas, formulate claims, use evidence, engage with sources, observe documentation conventions, and make linguistic choices suited to audience and purpose. These demands can be especially complex for students negotiating unfamiliar academic expectations alongside diverse educational and linguistic experiences (Harris & Silva, 1993; Hyland, 2019).

University writing centres offer individualised support for students working through these demands. North's (1984) influential argument that writing centres should develop writers rather than merely improve individual texts remains consequential. The text matters, but it is also a context in which students can learn to make decisions and address similar problems independently. A tutorial focused exclusively on correction may improve a local feature of a text while leaving the writer dependent on another person to identify and solve the next problem.

Writing centre pedagogy is enacted largely through talk. Tutors ask questions, invite students to read aloud, explain conventions, suggest alternatives, demonstrate procedures, respond as readers, assign follow-up work, and offer encouragement. Research has conceptualised these actions as cognitive, instructional, and motivational scaffolding (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013, 2014, 2015; Thompson, 2009). Cognitive scaffolding supports thinking; instructional scaffolding provides explanations, examples, suggestions, and direction; motivational scaffolding addresses confidence, ownership, and willingness to persist. These forms of support may overlap within a single interaction.

Yet identifying the strategies tutors used did not fully explain why they selected them. Why might a tutor ask a student to read a paragraph aloud instead of identifying errors directly? Why withhold an answer when a student expects one, but demonstrate a procedure in another case? Why pair praise with critique? Such decisions revealed tutors' assumptions about what students know, how they learn, how much assistance they need, and what responsibility they should retain for their work.

This article addressed the following objective: to examine why tutors manage students' writing challenges the way they do. Writing centre tutorial recordings are considered alongside post-session interviews, enabling analysis of both observed practices and tutors' retrospective explanations. Observation indicates what tutors did; interviews illuminate the purposes they attributed to their actions. The two sources of data support a more grounded analysis of pedagogical reasoning.

The choices tutors made reflected a developmental orientation. The tutors sought to address students' writing concerns while promoting awareness, ownership, confidence, critical thinking, practical competence, and independence. The findings fell under seven themes: fostering metacognitive awareness; promoting student ownership and autonomy; using dialogic questioning to develop critical thinking; affirming students to sustain confidence; demonstrating practical writing procedures; expanding ideas and critical depth; and integrating language development with writing instruction. Read together, they suggested a pattern of calibrated scaffolding: support is adjusted to the type of difficulty and the student's apparent needs, rather than governed by a fixed preference for either direct instruction or nondirective questioning. The study therefore answered the question: Why do tutors manage students' writing challenges the way they do?

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing Centres and the Development of Writers

Writing centre scholarship has long distinguished between helping students produce better texts and helping them become more capable writers. North (1984) argued that centres should focus on the development of writers, while Harris (1986, 1995) foregrounded the writing conference as an interactive space in which students and tutors talk through writing rather than treating the text as an object for correction alone. This orientation does not make textual quality irrelevant. Instead, it asks whether the tutorial also helps students understand rhetorical choices and develop practices that can be used beyond the current assignment.

Students may arrive with a sentence level concern while their more consequential difficulty lies in understanding the assignment, drafting an argument, or engaging with sources. A tutor who corrects every local error may leave these larger concerns untouched. Conversely, refusing to explain a convention in the name of independence may leave a student without the support needed to proceed. The pedagogical challenge is therefore not simply to choose between direct and indirect tutoring, but to judge which intervention is appropriate in a particular interaction.

Writing is recursive: writers may reconsider a topic after drafting, reorganise an argument after reading sources, or return to planning when evidence does not support an initial claim. Writing centre support consequently needs to respond to the writer's current position in the process rather than assume that every student needs the same help. This process orientation is central to understanding tutors' reasons for selecting different forms of support.

Tutor Talk and Scaffolding

Tutor talk in a writing centre refers to the verbal strategies and discourse practices tutors employ during writing centre tutorials to identify and address students' writing challenges, facilitate their understanding of writing concepts, and support their development as independent writers Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014; 2015). Tutor talk is a principal means through which writing centre pedagogy is enacted. Thompson (2009) analysed an experienced tutor's verbal and non-verbal strategies, while Mackiewicz and Thompson (2013; 2014; 2015) developed a framework that distinguishes motivational, instructional, and cognitive scaffolding. Instructional strategies include telling, suggesting, explaining, exemplifying, and assigning tasks. Cognitive strategies include prompting, questioning, inviting students to read aloud, responding as a reader or listener, and demonstrating procedures. Motivational strategies include praise, expressions of concern, empathy, optimism, and reinforcement of student ownership.

This framework makes visible the range of work performed during a tutorial. An explanation may resolve a technical problem; a question may help a student identify an inconsistency; and praise may help a student remain engaged with critique. These functions are analytically distinguishable but can overlap. A tutor may explain a convention while demonstrating it, ask a question while affirming a student's existing knowledge, or assign a task to transfer responsibility for the next stage of writing.

This study brings out the purposes tutors said their interventions served. One strategy may have different functions in different contexts. For example, a question may diagnose understanding, invite elaboration, challenge an assumption, or encourage ownership. Direct instruction may be appropriate when a student needs to see an unfamiliar procedure, but less appropriate when the goal is to develop an argument that must remain the student's intellectual work.

Autonomy, Ownership, and Writer Agency

Student ownership is a longstanding concern in writing centre pedagogy. Tutors are expected to help writers without taking over their texts or making decisions students need to learn to make. Harris and Silva (1993) discussed the need to support multilingual writers without reducing tutoring to error correction; Mackiewicz and Thompson (2015) described strategies through which tutors support students while maintaining their participation and control.

Ownership does not mean leaving students unsupported. It involves designing assistance so that students remain active participants. A tutor may ask a student to compare alternatives, generate a mind map, explain intended meaning, or practise a procedure. The student remains responsible for reasoning and decision-making while the tutor supplies prompts, feedback, or examples. The tension becomes especially clear when a student expects the tutor to provide a direct answer. The tutor must decide whether an immediate answer would solve the problem at the expense of a learning opportunity.

Questioning, Dialogue, and Critical Thinking

Tutorials are dialogic settings in which students articulate ideas and respond to another person's questions. Harris (1995) highlighted the importance of conversation in writing conferences, while Burbules (1993) conceptualised dialogue as a form of teaching and learning through which participants develop understanding. Questions may prompt a student to explain a topic choice, identify an intended audience, clarify a paragraph's purpose, or consider whether evidence supports a claim. Such questions can make reasoning explicit and reveal where further work is needed.

Questioning is also diagnostic. By asking what a student already knows, a tutor can identify partial understanding and decide what kind of assistance may be useful. This matters because similar writing problems can arise for different reasons: a student may not understand a concept, may understand it but struggle to apply it, or may have an idea but lack a way to organise it. Academic argumentation requires reasoning, not simply compliance with formal rules. The present study examines tutors' explanations of questioning as a means of diagnosing understanding, encouraging self-correction, and developing independent thinking.

Emotional Support and the Whole Writer

Writing can expose uncertainty. Students may worry about language errors, question whether their ideas are sufficiently academic, or interpret feedback as evidence of inability. Writing centre work, therefore, has an affective dimension alongside its cognitive and rhetorical dimensions. Mackiewicz and Thompson (2013) examined motivational scaffolding, including praise and expressions of concern. Driscoll and Wells (2020) argued for attention to the whole person in writing centre tutoring.

Motivational scaffolding should not mean uncritical praise or avoidance of correction. A supportive tutor can acknowledge what is working while identifying what needs development. Specific affirmation can communicate that a student has a viable idea, while constructive critique clarifies next steps. The important issue is whether emotional support is connected to the student's actual work rather than offered as generic reassurance.

Demonstration, Language, and Practical Writing Knowledge

Some writing difficulties concern procedures or conventions that students may not yet know how to perform. Formatting references, creating a hanging indent, or applying a grammatical convention may require explanation and a visible example. Demonstration can connect abstract knowledge to action. A tutor can model a procedure and then invite the student to perform it, explain the steps, or apply the principle to another example.

Language and writing instruction are also intertwined. Hyland (2019) treated second-language writing as involving linguistic resources and rhetorical choices, while Harris and Silva (1993) cautioned against reducing support for multilingual writers to error correction. Grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction affect clarity, but they occur within a larger communicative task. Tutors must address language features without allowing local corrections to eclipse argument, organisation, purpose, and meaning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory and Gass and Mackey's (2006) Interaction Approach. These perspectives are complementary but not interchangeable: Sociocultural Theory provides a broad account of learning as socially mediated development, while the Interaction Approach directs attention to the processes through which interaction, input, feedback, and language production may support learning.

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory views cognitive development as mediated through social interaction and cultural tools. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the distance between what a learner can accomplish independently and what the learner can accomplish with assistance. In a writing centre tutorial, the concept helps explain why a tutor may provide a prompt, model a procedure, or guide a student through a decision that the student cannot yet manage confidently alone. SCT conceptualises learning as socially mediated, with support provided within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). From this perspective, tutors' decisions to prompt, question, explain, or demonstrate can be interpreted as attempts to address perceived gaps in students' knowledge while enabling them to participate more actively in solving writing problems. The theory therefore directs attention to the relationship between the writing challenge, the support selected, and the degree of guidance the tutor considers necessary. Tutor interviews provide further evidence of the rationales underlying these choices, although the analysis does not assume that tutors' intentions necessarily result in learning or internalisation.

The Interaction Approach

Gass's (1997) Interaction Approach and Gass and Mackey's (2006) overview emphasise the role of interaction in language development. Interaction can provide input, elicit language production, make gaps in understanding noticeable, and create opportunities for feedback and modification. Although developed primarily in second-language acquisition, this perspective is useful for tutorials in which students and tutors discuss writing and language. The Interaction Approach complements SCT by explaining how tutors use interaction to address

writing difficulties and guide students' responses. It focuses the analysis on how tutors elicit ideas through questioning, clarify misunderstandings through feedback, encourage students to articulate their reasoning, and use demonstrations or explanations to make writing conventions more accessible. For example, when a student struggles to develop an argument, a tutor's questions may elicit the student's existing understanding and reveal where further support is needed; subsequent prompts or explanations may then respond to the difficulty identified. The Interaction Approach thus helps to explain how tutors' strategies emerge and are adjusted within tutorial exchanges, rather than treating tutor talk as a set of isolated techniques.

The two theories provide complementary analytical lenses for examining why tutors choose particular strategies. SCT illuminates the perceived developmental need that a strategy is intended to address, while the Interaction Approach illuminates how the strategy responds to and shapes the unfolding tutor–student exchange. Mackiewicz and Thompson's (2015) scaffolding framework provides the coding categories for classifying tutor practices, including instructional, cognitive, and motivational scaffolding. The analysis then connects each coded strategy to the writing challenge being addressed, the student's response, and the tutor's stated rationale. For instance, a tutor's demonstration may be coded as instruction, interpreted through SCT as guided support, and examined through the Interaction Approach in terms of how the tutor makes a writing procedure explicit and how the student responds. This combined framework enables the study to move from identifying what tutors do to interpreting why they select particular strategies, while distinguishing observed interaction, tutors' reported intentions, and the researcher's theoretical interpretation.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative descriptive design with quantitized thematic findings, situated within an interpretivist and constructivist orientation. It was conducted in four university writing centres in Kenya, anonymised as Writing Centres A–D. Participants comprised 11 peer tutors and 12 first-year student writers. The distribution of tutors was as follows: Writing Centre A had four tutors, Writing Centre B had three tutors, Writing Centre C had one tutor, and Writing Centre D had three tutors. This distribution ensured that tutors from all four writing centres were represented in the study. Twenty-one tutorials sessions were observed and audio-recorded; 12 complete tutorial sessions were selected for analysis, using systematic sampling selection from a session list, alongside 24 post-session interviews with tutors and students. Particular attention was paid to tutors' retrospective explanations of why they used particular interventions, while tutorial transcripts provided evidence of the practices being explained. Data was transcribed and analysed thematically, combining inductive theme development with interpretation informed by Mackiewicz and Thompson's (2015) framework of cognitive, instructional, and motivational scaffolding. To examine why tutors managed students responses the way they did, an inductive thematic analysis was applied to the tutorial transcripts and tutor interviews. The transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure deep immersion in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A preliminary list of all the reasons mentioned or implied in the dialogue was generated. These rationales were then coded line by line and grouped into emerging categories based on similarity and frequency. This thematic grouping enabled the researcher to map out the key reasons why tutors responded to students' writing challenges the way they did. Seven themes were identified. Descriptive counts and percentages were used to convey selected patterns within the qualitative dataset, not to support statistical generalisation. The small, purposively selected sample supports contextual interpretation rather than claims about all Kenyan university writing centres; moreover, retrospective interviews may not fully capture tutors' moment-by-moment reasoning. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent; institutional ethical approval and the required research permit were obtained. Writing centres and participants were anonymised, and all data were treated confidentially.

FINDINGS

Seven interrelated rationales emerged from the analysis. They are presented separately for clarity, although tutors often combined them in their practice. A question could promote critical thinking while diagnosing understanding; a demonstration could provide instruction while supporting later practice; and praise could accompany clear advice about revision. The themes should therefore be viewed as connected dimensions of a developmental orientation rather than mutually exclusive categories.

1. Scaffolding Metacognition for Student Awareness

The first rationale was to help students become more conscious of their writing and better able to notice problems independently. Tutors described asking students to read their work aloud as a way of making the text available for closer scrutiny. One tutor explained:

"I told her to read whatever she had written out loud because... maybe at times you'll find that you'll see the correction or see the mistake that maybe I've done in some part of the writing." (WCA-T01)

Another tutor noted, "*There are errors you can pick by listening, and you will not have seen them" (WCB-T07). A third stated, "When I make the students read, I make them conscious. They are aware of their mistakes because they are reading out loud"* (WCD-T11).

These accounts present reading aloud as a way for the tutor to hear what the student has written. It was intended to change how students attended to their own writing. Silent reading can allow writers to offer intended meaning automatically, whereas reading aloud may make awkward phrasing, missing links, or sentence-level problems more noticeable. Tutors intended to help students to become active readers of their own work rather than rely entirely on the tutor to identify errors. The practice illustrates cognitive scaffolding. The tutor directs a procedure, but the student remains responsible for listening, noticing, and deciding what to revise. From a sociocultural perspective, the procedure can be understood as a tool for supported self-monitoring. It may create conditions in which the student can practise evaluation that could later be undertaken independently. The study does not establish that internalisation occurred, but independent error recognition was a clear pedagogical aim. Tutors' rationale was to develop awareness, not merely to correct the current text.

2. Encouraging Ownership and Promoting Autonomy

A second rationale was to keep students intellectually involved and prevent dependence on the tutor. One tutor stated, *"If I try to be direct to the answers… next time he will also come and do the same thing. I'm trying to improve the writer, not just the writing"* (WCB-T06). Another explained, *"When I don't give them the answer, I'm trying to show them how to find it themselves"* (WCB-T07).

These statements connect immediate tutoring with students' future ability to make writing decisions. Tutors were concerned that routinely supplying answers could teach students to return for solutions rather than develop their own problem-solving practices. Mind mapping illustrated how support could be provided without taking over the intellectual work. A tutor invited a student to try the technique: *"So I'd love for you to do something for me, okay? Do you know how to draw a mind map?"* (WCA-T04). Reflecting on the session, the tutor said, "*She had that moment of realization... she did most of the refining. I guided her, but she realized most of it and corrected it herself. She got an awakening in terms of her thought process"* (WCA-T04).

The tutor emphasised the student's contribution. Guidance was present, but the tutor valued the moment when the student recognised relationships and refined the work herself. Mind mapping made ideas visible and gave the student a tool for organising them without handing control of the argument to the tutor. Follow-up tasks served a related purpose. One tutor explained that a student needed to understand that "academic writing has a procedure" and should "read further on how it's done." Such assignments extended responsibility beyond the tutorial. Autonomy here did not mean independence from all assistance; it meant using structured support to make the student more active in the work. The data show that tutors valued ownership as a goal, although they do not establish whether students subsequently became more independent.

3. Dialogic Questioning as a Tool for Critical Thinking

A third rationale was to stimulate thinking and identify what kind of support a student needed. One tutor explained, *"I used questions so that I get an overview of what he knows and what he doesn't know and what step to take"* (WCB-T05). Questioning was therefore diagnostic as well as instructional. It helped the tutor establish what the student understood before deciding how to proceed. Another tutor described how a question about topic

sentences helped a student identify a paragraph-level problem: *"I asked her, did the teacher talk to you about topic sentence? Through that, she was able to note… she is measuring two points within the same paragraph. The questions enabled her to see where she has gone wrong"* (WCD-T12). Rather than announcing the problem, the tutor asked a question that led the student to reconsider the paragraph. A third tutor explicitly rejected "spoon-feeding": "*I do not like spoon-feeding students… if I don't ask them questions, then they will expect me to tell them what to do, how to think. That's just not my style"* (WCC-T08). The tutor associated questions with the development of students' ability to think through their own writing.

Questioning thus served three related purposes: diagnosing current understanding, prompting self-correction, and developing independent reasoning. The pattern aligns with Sociocultural Theory's emphasis on mediated dialogue and with the Interaction Approach's attention to language production and feedback. Students could articulate what they meant, respond to a challenge, and refine an explanation. The evidence supports the claim that tutors intended questioning to develop critical engagement, not that it produced a measured increase in critical-thinking ability.

4. Affirmation and Emotional Scaffolding to Build Confidence

A fourth rationale was to support students' confidence and willingness to engage with difficult writing problems. One tutor explained, *"I do believe that the student needs to be affirmed where they are doing well… that strengthens their confidence in writing"* (WCD-T12). Another said, "*I was trying to motivate him and to show him that he has an idea of writing the summary… just a bit of polishing"* (WCB-T05). The latter statement reveals that affirmation did not replace feedback. The tutor acknowledged that the student had grasped the task while indicating that further refinement was needed. Other tutors used encouragement such as "*I think you actually get it… That's actually very good"* (WCA-T01) and "*I wish you all the best as you continue becoming the best writer you can"* (WCD-T10). These comments indicate that tutors considered the relational environment relevant to writing support. They sought to recognise students' capabilities while addressing weaknesses.

Writing difficulties may be experienced as personal inadequacy, particularly when students are unsure of academic conventions or their language resources. Affirmation can frame a difficulty as specific and workable rather than proof that a student cannot write. This does not mean praise necessarily reduces anxiety or improves performance; those outcomes were not measured. The finding instead establishes that tutors considered confidence relevant to how they managed writing challenges. Tutor training should therefore connect specific affirmation with clear, constructive feedback.

5. Demonstration and Multimodal Instruction for Practical Skills

A fifth rationale was to make technical writing procedures understandable and actionable. This was apparent in work on APA documentation and formatting. One tutor explained reference-list conventions and demonstrated a hanging indent: *"Let me show you hanging indent... this is how your reference will look. So, look at my laptop"* (WCA-T02). When asked why she demonstrated the procedure, the tutor said, *"Just saying it to her was not helpful… So I demonstrated how to format, how to do the layout"* (WCA-T02).

The tutor distinguished describing a procedure from making it visible. Verbal explanation alone had not seemed sufficient; showing the process allowed the student to see the sequence of actions and intended result. The rationale was practical: the student needed to understand not only what the convention required but how to carry it out. This finding complicates a simple opposition between directive and nondirective tutoring. Tutors valued student independence but also considered direct demonstration necessary for technical tasks. These practices are not contradictory if the form of support is selected in response to the problem. An unfamiliar formatting procedure may require explicit modelling, whereas a question about the significance of an argument may call for dialogue and student reasoning. Demonstration can be followed by guided practice: the tutor models a procedure, invites the student to perform it, and asks the student to explain the steps. Such a sequence connects explicit instruction with active application. The current data establish the use and rationale of demonstration, not whether students later performed the procedure independently.

6. Expanding Ideas and Critical Depth

A sixth rationale was to help students develop ideas beyond an initial or narrow formulation. Tutors sometimes responded as readers or listeners, asking questions that encouraged students to consider the scope and implications of a topic. One tutor asked a student writing about the effects of drugs:

"*Before I get to say something else, I want to get to understand your context. Are we talking about in school or outside the world also? Are we getting to talk about drugs affecting us in school or even in the outside world?*" (WCB-T07). The tutor later explained, *"He had focused on one effect of drugs… I wanted him to think more about... a wider vision of what drugs can do to us as students"* (WCB-T07). The questions encouraged the student to consider scope and relevant dimensions of the topic. The purpose was not simply to make the paper longer or broader; it was to help the student think more deliberately about what the argument covered and what might matter to its audience and purpose. Another tutor asked, *"What made you want that topic? What made you pick that topic?"* (WCA-T03). The tutor said the student began to consider where the situation was happening and to ask "Who? What? When? Where?"

These examples show that tutors did not treat writing challenges exclusively as language or formatting problems. They also sought to develop the substance of students' thinking. Academic writing requires a balance between focus and depth: a broad topic can be unmanageable, while a narrow topic can remain superficial if its significance is unexplored. Questions and reader responses were intended to help students negotiate this balance. The data reveal this purpose, but not a verified long-term change in critical-writing ability.

7. Integrated Language and Writing Instruction

The final theme concerned tutors' efforts to address language features within the broader writing task. Students' challenges included grammar, vocabulary, spelling, sentence construction, and language transfer. One tutor addressed punctuation and clause structure by explaining, "*And you put a comma. Because of the subordinating conjunction..."* (WCD-T11). The tutor also explained, *"When I read, they get to listen to how I'm reading it… I also try and improve their pronunciation"* (WCD-T11).

These examples show tutors attending language form as part of writing development. Sentence-level problems can affect readability and meaning, and a student may need an explicit explanation of a grammatical feature. However, the study's broader findings indicate that tutors also paid attention to argument, organisation, topic development, and academic conventions. Language was one dimension of writing, not the whole of it.This balance matters for students working across linguistic repertoires. Harris and Silva (1993) caution against tutoring multilingual writers through an exclusively error-focused approach, while Hyland (2019) situates second-language writing within the interaction of language resources and rhetorical demands. Tutors need to address language issues without allowing local correction to displace the writer's larger purpose. Their rationale for integrating language and writing was to support the student's ability to communicate meaning in the context of an actual writing task.

DISCUSSION

The seven themes point to a coherent, though not uniform, pedagogical orientation. Tutors connected immediate intervention with a broader aim: helping students become more aware of their writing, take responsibility for decisions, reason through problems, remain confident enough to revise, understand practical conventions, develop substantive ideas, and use language to communicate clearly. The findings support an interpretation of writing centre tutoring as developmental and relational rather than merely corrective.

The main contribution is the distinction between the strategy enacted and the rationale attributed to it. Scaffolding frameworks provide a vocabulary for classifying tutor talk as cognitive, instructional, or motivational (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013, 2014, 2015; Thompson, 2009). This analysis adds a complementary question: what purpose did tutors say the practice served? Reading aloud was associated with metacognitive awareness; questioning with diagnosis and independent thinking; mind mapping and follow-up tasks with ownership; affirmation with confidence; demonstration with practical comprehension; reader-response questions with depth;

and language explanation with clearer expression. Strategy and rationale are related but not identical. A single strategy can serve more than one purpose, and a similar purpose may be pursued through different strategies.

The findings also caution against a rigid opposition between directive and nondirective tutoring. Tutors valued independence but considered direct demonstration necessary for technical tasks. They asked questions to prompt thought but also explained grammatical and formatting conventions. They affirmed students while offering critique. The relevant pedagogical question is therefore not whether tutors should always tell or always ask, but how they judge the form and degree of assistance appropriate to a particular difficulty.

The concept of calibrated scaffolding captures this pattern. Calibration involves determining what the student already understands, selecting a form of support suited to the task, and deciding how much responsibility to retain or return to the student. Questions and listening may reveal the student's current position. A prompt may help develop an idea; reader response may expose an unclear argument; demonstration may make a procedure visible; and affirmation may sustain engagement. The study does not show that tutors followed a formal sequence, but their explanations reveal reasoning that was consistent with responsive support.

Sociocultural Theory helps explain why calibration matters. If learning is mediated through interaction and tools, tutoring is not simply the transfer of correct answers. Reading aloud, mind maps, questions, and demonstrations can function as mediational resources. Tutors' stated concern with autonomy is consistent with the developmental direction of the ZPD: assistance is valuable when it enables participation and may support later independent performance. However, this study did not measure internalisation or transfer. Longitudinal evidence is needed before such outcomes can be claimed.

The Interaction Approach draws attention to the conversational process. Students were asked to explain ideas, answer questions, listen to their writing, and respond to feedback. The conversation itself helped make understanding explicit and allowed students to reconsider language and content. Sociocultural Theory foregrounds mediated development; the Interaction Approach helps explain how exchanges can create opportunities for noticing and reformulation.

The affective dimension is also significant. Tutors did not treat confidence as unrelated to academic work. Their accounts suggest that they wanted students to remain engaged while confronting weaknesses. This does not mean emotional support should replace clear feedback. Rather, affirmation and critique can coexist: a tutor can recognise a promising idea and still ask for clearer reasoning, stronger evidence, or more precise language. The study records tutors' intentions not measured changes in students' emotional states or writing outcomes.

The findings also indicate that language accuracy and higher-order writing concerns were addressed together. Tutors discussed grammar and pronunciation but also asked about topic choice, context, scope, and argument development. This supports contextualised language instruction: sentence-level features matter when they affect meaning or readability, but they should be considered alongside the purpose of the text and the writer's rhetorical goals. This is particularly relevant in multilingual contexts, where students should not be defined primarily by perceived language deficits. The Kenyan context extends an established discussion of tutor talk into a setting where writing centres are still developing institutionally. The evidence does not show that these practices are unique to Kenya or representative of every centre but it documents how tutors in four Kenyan university writing centres explained their choices and shows that their reasoning resonates with broader discussions of scaffolding, autonomy, dialogue, and writer development.

Tutors' intentions were geared towards helping students to become more independent, confident, reflective, and critical. These aims are important, but they do not establish that students achieved them. Post-session interviews provided access to retrospective explanations, which may be selective or shaped by professional ideals. Observed interaction grounds these accounts, but fuller evidence of development would require analysis of later drafts, subsequent tutorial behaviour, and writing in other contexts. The article therefore presents the seven themes as evidence of pedagogical reasoning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This article makes the following recommendations:

1. Pedagogical reasoning should be emphasised in tutor training. Tutor preparation should move beyond lists of strategies and ask tutors to explain why an intervention is appropriate. Transcript-based training can compare when questioning, explanation, demonstration, reader response, or affirmation may be useful. Tutors should practise identifying the writing problem, establishing what the student understands, selecting support, and reflecting on how responsibility can be returned to the writer.
2. Tutors should be trained to calibrate direct and indirect support. The findings do not support a rigid rule that tutors should never provide answers or always rely on questions. Technical procedures may call for demonstration; argument development may call for questions and reader response; discouraged students may need specific affirmation alongside clear feedback. Tutors should check whether students can apply a demonstrated procedure rather than assume that watching is equivalent to learning.
3. Student ownership should be preserved while providing meaningful guidance. Writing centre policies should clarify that ownership does not mean leaving students to struggle without support. Tutors should avoid taking over student texts while recognising when explicit teaching is needed. A productive tutorial makes the student's role visible: the student explains intended meaning, evaluates alternatives, tries a procedure, and identifies next steps. Follow-up tasks should be manageable and clearly connected to the tutorial.
4. Emotional support should be integrated with substantive feedback. Tutor training should address how to provide specific, credible praise and pair affirmation with constructive critique. Tutors can identify what is working, explain why, and then prioritise next steps. Generic reassurance should not replace substantive guidance.
5. Language instruction should be connected to rhetorical purpose. Tutors should address grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction when these features affect clarity or intended meaning, while maintaining attention to argument, organisation, evidence, audience, and purpose. Tutor preparation should include respectful approaches to multilingual writers and strategies for distinguishing recurring patterns from isolated errors.
6. Institutional support for writing centres should be strengthened. University administrators should recognise centres as part of academic learning infrastructure rather than optional proofreading services. Centres need clear institutional roles, suitable physical and digital resources, tutor development, and constructive relationships with academic departments. Such collaboration should preserve the role of the centre in developing writers rather than completing assessed work.

CONCLUSION

This article examined why tutors in four Kenyan university writing centres managed students' writing challenges in the ways they did. Analysis of 12 tutorial sessions and 24 post-session interviews identified seven interrelated rationales: fostering metacognitive awareness, promoting ownership and autonomy, using dialogic questioning to develop critical thinking, affirming students to sustain confidence, demonstrating practical procedures, expanding ideas and critical depth, and integrating language instruction with writing development.

Across these themes, tutors described a concern extending beyond correction of the immediate text. They wanted students to notice their writing problems, think through alternatives, retain responsibility for decisions, and develop confidence in handling academic writing demands. At the same time, tutors recognised that students sometimes needed explicit explanation, visible demonstration, or language-focused feedback. Their accounts suggest that tutoring cannot be reduced to a choice between directive and nondirective methods. The more important issue is how support is calibrated to the student's needs and the task.

The principal contribution of the study was to bring tutors' stated rationales into the analysis of tutor talk. By examining why tutors said they used particular strategies, the study complemented classifications of cognitive, instructional, and motivational scaffolding with an account of the purposes those strategies were intended to serve. Sociocultural Theory and the Interaction Approach help interpret tutoring as mediated, dialogic work in which students are invited to articulate, reconsider, and practise writing decisions.

These findings should be interpreted within the limits of the qualitative design, small purposive sample, and reliance in part on retrospective accounts. They do not establish causal effects on writing quality, independent performance, or transfer. Further research should follow students beyond the tutorial and examine how they use, adapt, or reject the strategies discussed. Within these limits, the study offers a clear implication: tutor development should cultivate not only a repertoire of strategies but also the judgement needed to select, explain, and adjust them. The aim is to provide enough support for students to move forward while keeping the intellectual work of writing in their hands.

REFERENCES

1. Burbules, N. C. (1993). Dialogue in teaching: Theory and practice. Teachers College Press.
2. Driscoll, D. L., & Perdue, S. W. (2012). Theory, lore, and more: An analysis of RAD research in The Writing Center Journal, 1980–2009. The Writing Center Journal, 32(2), 11–39. https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1744
3. Driscoll, D. L., & Wells, J. (2020). Tutoring the whole person: Supporting emotional development in writers and tutors. Praxis: A Writing Center Journal, 17(3), 16–28.
4. Gass, S. (1997). Input, interaction, and the second language learner. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203053560
5. Gass, S., & Mackey, A. (2006). Input, interaction, and output: An overview. AILA Review, 19, 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.19.03gas
6. Harris, M. (1986). Teaching one-to-one: The writing conference. National Council of Teachers of English.
7. Harris, M. (1995). Talking in the middle: Why writers need writing tutors. College English, 57(1), 27–42. https://doi.org/10.58680/ce19959147
8. Harris, M., & Silva, T. (1993). Tutoring ESL students: Issues and options. College Composition and Communication, 44(4), 525–537. https://doi.org/10.2307/358388
9. Hyland, K. (2019). Second language writing (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667251
10. Mackiewicz, J. (2004). The effects of tutor expertise in engineering writing: A linguistic analysis of writing tutors' comments. IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, 47(4), 316–328. https://doi.org/10.1109/TPC.2004.840485
11. Mackiewicz, J., & Thompson, I. (2013). Motivational scaffolding, politeness, and writing center tutoring. The Writing Center Journal, 33(1), 38–73. https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1756
12. Mackiewicz, J., & Thompson, I. (2014). Instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding in writing center tutoring. Composition Studies, 42(1), 54–78.
13. Mackiewicz, J., & Thompson, I. (2015). Talk about writing: The tutoring strategies of experienced writing center tutors. Routledge.
14. North, S. M. (1984). The idea of a writing center. College English, 46(5), 433–446. https://doi.org/10.2307/377047
15. Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? Research in Nursing & Health, 23(4), 334–340.
16. Sandelowski, M. (2001). Real qualitative researchers do not count: The use of numbers in qualitative research. Research in Nursing & Health, 24(3), 230–240. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.1025
17. Thompson, I. (2009). Scaffolding in the writing center: A microanalysis of an experienced tutor's verbal and nonverbal tutoring strategies. Written Communication, 26(4), 417–453.https://doi.org/10.1002/1098
18. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press.