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What Constitutes Effective Tutoring on Scripts and Oral Presentations? Report from the Waseda Writing Center

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Abstract

While speeches and oral presentations are categorized as being oral communication, they also have a written component. Therefore, how can Writing Center tutors give effective feedback on such materials? By looking at the tutors' experiences at one Writing Center in Japan, this paper aims to explore how tutors give feedback on presentations, and what could be improved in dealing with such texts. By analyzing writers' 'Welcome Sheets', tutors' comments and notes, as well as a session transcript, we discovered that tutors are more focused on achieving structural, logical, content and grammar goals during the sessions. They tend not to give feedback on the presentation script, or the coherence and content of additional material such as slides, that we also consider relevant written matter. Hence, this paper suggests that while focusing on High Order Concerns (such as structure and content) must be the priority, tutors should also address issues related to timing, the usefulness of visual support and its integration with the presentation flow and script. For this reason, specific training for tutors on presentations is needed.

Keywords: writing center, Japanese university, presentations, scripts

Currently, writers bring their oral presentation scripts, speeches and slides to the Waseda Writing Center, expecting relevant feedback on such materials. However, while presentations are written, they also have a fundamental spoken component. Mainly in Anglophone countries such as the US and UK, training and education specifically related to presentations is offered as part of the university curriculum and supported by Writing or Speaking Centers; nevertheless, as the present report will illustrate, this pattern of differentiating presentations from other writing materials does not seem to be generally applied in the Waseda Writing Center, one of the leading writing centers in Japan.

As teaching associates tutoring at the Waseda Writing Center since 2015, the authors noticed that while presentations are accepted at the center, they are not the object of specific

tutor training¹ like research proposals or specialized papers among others, and seemed to be treated by tutors as regular written materials, despite the aforementioned differences. Considering the educational importance of developing both writing and presentation skills, the aim of this report is to shed some light on the following issues: what are the most common methods currently used by tutors at the Waseda Writing Center when addressing presentations with and without scripts? Since presentations have both a written and oral component, are the specific needs and issues of such materials addressed? If not, what could be improved?

The paper is divided in seven sections: literature review, experience of other writing centers, research methodology, analysis of research findings, discussion and further research, references and appendix.

What Constitutes a Good Presentation

Before addressing the issue of how presentations are handled in writing centers, it is important to know what constitutes a good presentation, and what criteria it should follow to be compelling. In order to give effective feedback on materials brought to writing centers, it is fundamental for tutors to know what the *gold standard* for presentations is.

The issue of how to give effective presentations is often addressed in books and articles by public speakers or advisors/teachers of rhetoric, among others. Their advice mainly covers the following categories: structure and title, visual support, presentation delivery and mental preparation.

It is commonly agreed that there are three basic parts in a presentation: an opening, which introduces the topic and catches the attention of the public; a body that proves the idea and the existence of the problem; and a closing, summarizing the whole message and indicating the results or conclusive points (Britton, 2007). Leaving the audience with a final thought or reflection can also create a persuasive ending.

The title is important to catch the listener's attention, and should clearly summarize the topic and be easy to understand: this can be achieved by using familiar, simple language or image-producing words such as metaphors (Britton, 2007). Also, the message and purpose of the presentation should be concise and clearly stated. Additionally, it is important to understand the

¹ At the Waseda Writing Center, tutors have a weekly training session with the aim of improving tutors' skills and the quality of feedback during sessions. In the training, tutors reflect on different types of papers and strategies utilized in various kinds of sessions.

audience in advance to uncover their expectations, concerns and desires, to build rapport and to identify with the group in order to catch and keep the attention (Britton, 2007).

Visual support is also a fundamental part of a presentation. According to experts, slides should support rather than replace the speaker, and to this end, objects on screen should be reduced to a minimum: text and images should be big enough for everyone in the audience to see, and slides should avoid unnecessary clutter (Reynolds, 2009). Additionally, data should be presented in a clear and captivating way: when using tools such as tables and figures, they should work as a stand-alone without further explanation, and only include the data relevant to the presentation at hand (Giba & Ribes, 2011).

In terms of delivery, verbal devices and body language seem to be considered among the most important elements. Specific rhetorical devices can help presenters catch the audience's attention: among those often suggested are repetitions, examples and metaphors, compare and contrast, rhetorical questions and anecdotes. They can create an emotional response in the audience and help listeners remember, understand and focus on the key points of the presentation (Atkinson, 2005). As for body language, the emphasis is on confidence and engagement with the audience: presenters should stand straight, smile and make eye contact with the attendees. One's own body can also be used to keep the audience's attention level high, by slowly pacing around the stage and/or pointing at important elements on the slides (Gallo, 2010).

Nervousness can also make a difference between a good and bad presentation. To confront it, some authors suggest to prepare a script or notes to organize ideas and plan the speech ahead, especially keeping in mind the timing (Kerber, 2008), to prepare additional slides that can answer questions one anticipates (Adler, 2010) and to identify problems by recording one's own speech and listening to it (Britton, 2007). Practicing the talk in front of a diverse audience, including lab mates, friends or family outside one's research area, is also advisable, and in the end, it is better to think about the panelists and the audience as friends (Adler, 2010). Finally, checking the room and logistics in advance can give security to the speaker (Kerber, 2008).

Once basic criteria for effective presentations are established, attention can be focused on how writing centers generally address this hybrid piece of academic writing.

Experience of Other Writing Centers: A Brief Overview

In order to get a clearer picture of how presentations are generally addressed in writing centers (Centers from here on), a random sample was selected and their practices analyzed by looking at publicly available documentation. The sample consisted of 12 centers located in US universities, 12 in European countries, and 10 in Japan, all accepting English material (sometimes in combination with material in other local languages)². The objective was to investigate if they offer specific sessions/workshops on presentations, and if so on what aspects they focus.

Looking at the data, US Centers are divided in offering a special focus on presentations and speeches. While around half of the universities do not specifically mention presentations, the other half does focus on the oral elements that differentiate them from papers, providing either specialized tutoring or educational handouts on matters like rhetoric, stage fright, slides design etc.. In the case of specific feedback being offered, experts and scholars of public speaking/rhetoric tend to be part of the Center's staff.

The situation in the European Union seems to be quite different. 75% of the analyzed European centers do not have a specific focus on presentations or speeches, even though they are accepted as possible materials to work on. The centers that do offer specific feedback seem to be run only by faculty, i.e. no peer tutoring is available.

The case of Japan is similar, as most centers do not seem to deal with presentations in a specific manner, even though they are accepted as materials to work on. In 20% of the cases³ in which some specific work on presentations is done (usually in the form of workshops), it is left in the hands of full-time faculty.

To sum up, it seems that a specific focus on presentations is offered when faculty trained on the matter work at the center, suggesting that such faculty might be able to either personally tutor students or train peer tutors on the matter. This happens more often in the U.S., where

² Writing Centers were selected looking at Centers' lists provided by the European Writing Centers Association (which also includes US Writing Centers) and the Writing Centers Association of Japan. Writing Centers were selected based on the availability of public documentation concerning the types of sessions addressed.

The Japanese case was used as baseline in terms of sample number: out of the 12 University Writing Centers' websites listed, after excluding the Waseda Writing Center, only 10 had an accessible website.

³ By looking at the publicly available data, 2 Centers out of the 10 university Centers affiliated with the Japanese Writing Center Association hold tutoring or events explicitly focused on presentations.

universities include presentation-related material on their websites⁴, and often offer courses in rhetoric, effective speech writing⁵ and public speaking⁶- something not common in Europe⁷, and even less common in Japan. The lack of focus on presentation-related training in Japan might also be due to the features of the Japanese school learning system, a mostly “teacher-centered” system (Hyland, 1993, p. 73), in which the students listen to the teacher’s explanations to learn. Up to university level, not much focus is placed on oral examination, or on students researching and presenting their own findings (Stephens & Blight, 2005).

In this context, it is easy to understand why not much attention is put on presentations. One finding in the current survey also seems to confirm this. An analysis of the Waseda Writing Center sessions showed that graduate students brought presentations much more often than undergraduate students. This suggests that students do not find it necessary to obtain feedback on presentations in their early university career, either because they are not given such assignments or because they do not deem them important enough for feedback.

After analyzing what the common practices outside and inside Japan are, in the following section we present data related to feedback on presentations and speeches collected at the Waseda Writing Center, located in Tokyo, Japan.

Overview of the Survey

The Waseda Writing Center (WWC hereafter) was chosen among the Japanese centers because of the access it offered to its archived materials. Additionally, tutors working at the WWC have received education in different countries and belong to a wide spectrum of specialties. This increases the chances that they will have been exposed to presentations in the course of their academic career. We investigated the WWC sessions in which students looked for

⁴ Just to give a partial example, all the Ivy League universities include advice on giving effective presentations in their websites, usually as part of their learning center materials or library websites.

⁵ A partial list of U.S. based rhetoric programs can be found here:
<https://www.universities.com/programs/rhetoric-and-composition-writing-studies-degrees>

⁶ A partial list of U.S based public speaking programs can be found here
<http://www.hotcoursesabroad.com/study/training-degrees/us-usa/public-speaking-courses/loc/211/cgory/kb.31-4/sin/ct/programs.html>

⁷ According to the Rhetoric Society of Europe, in Europe there are less than 10 programs specializing in rhetoric <http://eusorhet.eu/programs-in-europe/>. There do not seem to be any programs specifically dedicated to public speaking in Europe, but sometimes courses might be offered under the communication studies umbrella or in summer school programs.

feedback on scripts and presentations, and analyzed archived materials available in the WWC. We also analyzed the full transcript of one session related to a presentation.

Data background

In most cases, given the fact that a transcript is not present, it is difficult to know precisely what kind of commentary was given during the session. However, writer/tutor interactions and the tutor's feedback can still be inferred by session-related documents archived at the end of the session. Usable material includes the writing center's 'Welcome Sheet' compiled by the writer, archived presentation/script material that the writer brought to the session (including the tutor's comments written on the paper), and the 'Tutor's Evaluation of the Session'.

The 'Welcome Sheet' is filled out by the writer before the start of the session, and includes some personal information⁸, information about the paper (such as type of assignment, length and deadline) and desired purpose of the session. The session material is the printed paper itself and/or any note that writers and tutors might have written on it. The 'Tutor's Evaluation of the Session' is filled at the end of the session: tutors have space to freely write notes on the session, leave memos for the other tutors, evaluate how important the session would be in terms of possible usage in future trainings and also highlight some key features of the material, for example its being a highly specialized piece of writing. This sheet is valuable to understand if the tutor takes into consideration the differences between 'paper-only' material and presentations, and consequently adopts specific feedback strategies.

Nevertheless, by looking only at the aforementioned elements, a tutor's diagnosis of presentations and the consequent feedback might not be fully captured. Thus, one full recording of a session⁹, related to a presentation, was analyzed. The writer was an ESL graduate student: the recording includes both an audio file and a transcribed written file. These data were analyzed, searching for common patterns in tutors' feedback on these types of sessions. The interest laid in finding out if tutors at the WWC utilize strategies and address concerns specific to presentations.

⁸ Personal information includes name, department, native language, level in the session target language, experience with writing classes.

⁹ Since 2013, the Waseda Writing Center requires that all tutors record one session per semester for research purposes. The recordings and relative transcripts are then archived and made available for consultation to all tutors working at the center.

Sampling and analysis method

We focused on sessions with English presentation material: this includes both English-English (written material in English discussed in English) and English-Japanese sessions (written material in English, but discussed in Japanese). The writers have been randomly selected among schools specializing in a wide range of disciplines, from humanities to social sciences to STEM fields¹⁰. When collecting data, we included the following material (the number of analyzed sessions followed by the percentage is included in brackets):

- 16 Presentation scripts with no slides (44.44%)
- 5 Presentation scripts plus slides (13.88%)
- 15 Slides only, with no script, including 1 recorded session (41.66%)

(Total: 36)

As for the analysis method, we read through the aforementioned archived materials looking for traces of remarks specifically related to presentations, such as mentions of timing, usefulness, comments on visual support and persuasiveness. Our findings are also based on the number of observations in Welcome Sheets and Tutors' Evaluation Sheet (see Tables 1 and 2 in the appendix).

Analysis of Findings

When analyzing the Welcome Sheet, session material, and Tutor's Evaluation of the Session across various types of sessions (see appendix), three interesting points emerged.

The first interesting point concerned how presentations materials with and without slides are identified and evaluated in terms of usefulness by the tutors at the WWC. The evaluation of the session is particularly important because upon permission of the student and consequent anonymization, some of the session material might be used for tutors' training. In terms of evaluation, there was a stark difference between sessions dealing with scripts (with or without slides) and those dealing only with slides. While the former were considered by tutors as useful

¹⁰ More precisely, the writers belonged to the following Waseda University schools: Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies (GSAPS), School of International Liberal Studies (SILS), School of Advanced Science and Engineering, Graduate School of International Culture and Communication Studies (GSICCS), Graduate School of Fundamental Science and Engineering, Faculty of Letters Arts and Science, Life Science and Medical Bioscience, School of Political Science and Economics, School of Creative Science and Engineering, Graduate School of Letters, Life and Science.

or very useful, in most cases the latter were considered “not useful”. This implies that presentations without scripts will not be thought of as useful examples for tutor training.

Regarding the identification, in the evaluation sheet, all tutors recognized presentations and scripts as belonging to their own specific category: writers also commonly identified them as their own specific category. Nevertheless, by looking at tutors’ notes when dealing with scripts, even though presentations are identified with the specific category of presentation, PPT or script, they are treated as regular essays since issues addressed in session were related to structure, mechanics and content (see Table 2 in the appendix). Issues related to presentation practice, rhythm, persuasion, connection between slides and paragraphs, were not generally checked (see Tables 1 and 2 in the appendix). In the recorded session, a point related to such issues was raised:

Writer: Do you think it will make my presentation very boring if I read only? [...]

Tutor: Yes, if you only read the slides yes, it’s going to be a little boring. But, if you read the slide and then comment on what you have said, then it’s fine. And you don’t have to necessarily read everything, yes? I mean, here you have the points in detail. You can just talk a little bit of...

Writer: Yes, point the important.

While this feedback was appropriate, it was the only mention in the session on how to present effectively. During the other sessions, only in two cases of similar feedback (orally mentioning a certain part of the slide instead of writing it on it) was given.

A second important point concerned one key feature of presentations: timing. In the Welcome Sheet, students defined the length of the presentation in terms of time (see Table 1), but looking at the tutors’ notes and memos, that point did not seem to be addressed. A full, timed rehearsal seems to be rarely carried out; even in the recorded session, while the tutor and writer planned and started a rehearsal, it was interrupted after a few minutes and never concluded.

The third and final finding was the way feedback was given on visual aids, i.e. slides, which can be considered as written materials. While some of the slides brought at the WWC followed the criteria of effectiveness as outlined previously in this paper, many others did not. However, feedback on visual support was mostly minor (dealing only with issues like typos or

bolding/italicizing) or was absent. More fundamental issues typical of presentations, such as logic and structure of the slides, cluttered slides or unclear usage of images, were only marginally addressed and only in one of the analyzed sessions.

To sum up, it seems that even when the writer only brought visual aids, the session was generally led as a session on a regular paper, and while attention was given to High Order Concerns (HOCs¹¹), such as content and structure, it was not given to aspects unique to presentations, for example the quality of visual aid. Considering the aforementioned findings, the following section explores the implications on tutoring practice.

Discussion and Further Research

Giving feedback on HOCs should be the first priority of a tutor, as the main goal of the writing center is to address the main issues or points of improvement for written pieces. But presentations are an hybrid case, mixing both writing and speaking: it is thus important to recognize this special nature. Tutors treating presentations as regular essays and considering them not useful for training implies that specific training on this kind of academic material is perceived as less necessary. However, at the same time training on how to deal with writing that needs to fulfill specific requirements in terms of content, structure or both (for example, study abroad applications or research proposals) is a common practice. Thus, specific discussion on what makes an effective presentation should also be included in the tutors' toolbox: even when experts on presentations are not available among the WWC staff or faculty, training could be designed on the basis of previous literature on the topic, or by looking at other Centers' practices.

Yet, it must be considered that writing centers dealing with multiple languages and non-native speakers present specific challenges. The level of fluency of the writer in the target language might have an impact on several factors; for instance, on the writer's level of "comfort" while presenting - stage fright might become more challenging for a writer who has to deliver the presentation in a language they are not comfortable with, and they might not be able to carry out a presentation without reading from a script or from the slides. In an EFL setting, tweaking of the effectiveness criteria (as expressed by experts in Section 2) might be required to meet the

¹¹ Higher Order Concerns (HOC) refers to the points that should be addressed and considered first when revising a paper or, in other words, the ones that deal with "macro-level issues" (Zent, 2001). These major problems can be related to thesis, organization, logic, development of ideas and format. Low Order Concerns (LOC) are secondary issues, to be addressed only after the HOC issues are solved, and refer to grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, word choice and spelling, basically "errors that interfere with comprehension" (University of Washington, 2017)

writers' needs: for instance, a writer with difficulties in speaking in a foreign language might find text-heavy slides helpful or utterly necessary. Further considerations on how to cater for feedback on presentations matching it to the level of fluency of the writer should thus be addressed. Additionally, as mentioned in Section 3, students in Japan seem to face presentations only when proceeding from graduate studies. The centers could play a key role in giving feedback on a type of assignment that undergraduate and graduate students might not be familiar with and might not be able to discuss with their professors or peers. Thus, we believe that centers can start providing relevant support from an undergraduate level as well.

The specific nature of presentations also leads to another important implication for tutoring practice: while oral expressions might not be part of a writing center's scope and tutors might not be able to give feedback on such matters, it would be advisable to at least address issues related to visual aids. Slides are "*written*", and as such they can be considered as belonging to the material centers deal with: visual aids should be considered a fundamental part of a presentation in addition to images and tables in a paper. Even simple feedback could help writers develop better presentation skills, which they would find advantageous for both their academic life and their career. Slides are also intrinsically linked with the structure and content of a presentation, and giving feedback on one would reflect on the other.

Given the importance of visual aids and rehearsal, it would also be useful to have a specific space for writers where they could fully practice their presentations with the necessary tools and space, if desired. Hence, a space could be reserved in the centers for interested writers.

Finally, creating a presentation script is important, as it can help writers organize and express their ideas clearly by writing them down. Bringing a script to the center also increases the chances of receiving relevant feedback on how to better structure the argument and deliver it in a logical and persuasive way, as scripts are more similar to a standard written essay. In fact, being able to read and visualize the speech that will be presented helps tutors give more accurate comments and advice.

This survey only provides a general view of the current state of presentations' tutoring at the WWC, and faces various limitations. The first important limitation is related to the in-session language. Given the tutoring language of the authors, the study focused on sessions with English material; no Japanese sessions on Japanese materials were analyzed. It would be interesting to

expand the observations to include Japanese language presentations, and investigate whether Japanese tutors adopt different strategies when giving feedback during such sessions.

A second limitation is related to the experiences of other writing centers. Material used to train tutors on peer-tutoring is not commonly available to the public, thus the information presented here might be only partial. Hence, it would be interesting to learn more about the training of centers that offer specific sessions on presentations, or to investigate if some centers that do not specifically address presentations on their publicly available material still train tutors on this topic.

A third limitation is the availability of only one full transcript of a session related to a presentation at the time of writing, and the limited amount of material observed. It would be useful to record more sessions related to presentations and analyze a larger number of sessions featuring presentations in order to have a more accurate picture of what kind of feedback tutors give in those situations.

Conclusions

To sum up, this report pointed out that analyzed materials related to presentations were not considered useful for tutor training sessions, implying that there is a lack of reflection on presentations among tutors. Also, it assessed shortcomings in tutors' feedback on presentations in terms of lack of attention to timing and visual aids. As a consequence, we highlighted the need for tutors to focus more on scripts and coherence of additional materials with the presentation, and to receive specific training on presentations.

Ultimately, we believe that Waseda Writing Center can play an important role in developing its tutors' training and helping students to improve their presentation skills, which will have important implications for their future career.

Notes on the contributors

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Appendix

- 36 sessions
- 16 Presentation scripts with no slides (44.44%)
 - 5 Presentation scripts plus slides (13.88%)
 - 15 Slides only, with no script, including 1 recorded session (41.66%)

TABLE 1. Welcome sheet

Session category: EE and EJ

Type of assignment	Number of observations (%)
Writing or language skills assignment	5 (13.88%)
Class report or term paper	5 (13.88%)
Journal article, abstract or conference paper	10 (27.77%)
Thesis	5 (13.88%)
Other	4 (11.11%)
Other- Journal Club	1 (2.77%)
Other-Zemi presentation	1 (2.77%)
Other-presentation paper for workshop	1 (2.77%)
Other-presentation materials related to 1-5	7 (19.44%)
Non specified	1 (2.77%)
Course	Number of observations

Concept building and discussion	6 (16.66%)
Journal club	2 (5.5%)
English III	1 (2.77%)
English Academic Presentation	2 (5.5%)
Political Science and Culture in Southeast Asia	1 (2.77%)
Seminar	
Others non specified	6 (16.66%)
Not understandable	
	16 (44.44%)
	1 (2.77%)
Assignment topic	Number of observations
Presentation	4 (11.11%)
Final presentation	2 (5.5%)
Research proposal presentation	1 (2.77%)
Presentation paper for workshop	1 (2.77%)
Specific topic ¹²	5 (13.88%)
Speech	2 (5.5%)
Script	1 (2.77%)

¹² Introduce about my country; political philosophy; supercomputer; conference

Shinjuku Pedestrian Environment	1 (2.77%)
Alternative Teacher Preparation	1 (2.77%)
Teach for all replication in different cultural contexts	1 (2.77%)
The Americanization of the Holocaust	2 (5.5%)
The National Japanese American Relocation Council	2 (5.5%)
Non specified	15 (41.66%)
What do you want to achieve?	Number of observations
Grammar	11 (30.55%)
Persuasion	1 (2.77%)
Logic	4 (11.11%)
Make it shorter	2 (5.5%)
Flow	1 (2.77%)
Content	2 (5.5%)
Format	1 (2.77%)
Check the slides	1 (2.77%)
Presentation Skills	1 (2.77%)
Structure	5 (13.88%)
Rhythm	1(2.77%)
Style	1 (2.77%)
How to write the essay	1 (2.77%)
Specific Paragraph	1 (2.77%)

Conclusion	1 (2.77%)
Practice Presentation	2 (5.5%)
Clarity	2 (5.5%)
Connection between slides and paragraphs	2 (5.5%)
Native expressions	1 (2.77%)
Word usage	3 (8.33%)
Further ideas	1 (2.77%)
Advice on academic writing	1 (2.77%)
Research objective	2 (5.5%)
Outline	1 (2.77%)
Methodology	1 (2.77%)
“I got used to this presentation so I don’t understand”	1 (2.77%)
Non specified	1 (2.77%)
	4 (11.11%)
Stage of writing	Number of observations
Outline	2 (5.5%)
Rough Draft	11 (30.55%)
Final Draft	19 (52.77%)
Non-specified	1 (2.77%)

Length, defined by	Number of observations
Timing	12 (33.33%)
Words or pages	5 (13.88%)
Non Specified	4 (11.11%)

TABLE 2. Tutor comments in the “Tutor’s Evaluation Sheet”

Issues of the writing	Number of observations
Brainstorming/outlining	8 (22.22%)
Structure	23 (63.88%)
Content	21 (58.33%)
Mechanics	18 (50%)
Citations/bibliography	4 (11.11%)
Other-ppt slides	1 (2.77%)
Dealt in session	Number of observations
Brainstorming/outlining	8 (22.22%)
Structure	18 (50%)
Content	17 (47.22%)
Mechanics	15 (41.66%)
Citations/Bibliography	3 (8.33%)
Other-ppt slides	1 (2.77%)
Remaining issues	Number of observations
Structure	7 (19.44%)
Content	8 (22.22%)
Mechanics	8 (22.22%)

Citations/Bibliography	1 (2.77%)
Notes on the session	Number of observations
Yes	35 (97.22)
No	1 (2.77%)
Level of usefulness	Number of observations
Not very useful (1)	15 (41.66%)
Useful (2)	16 (44.44%)
Very useful (3)	4 (11.11%)
Key words	Number of observations
Short essay	12 (33.33%)
Long paper	2 (5.5%)
Communication style	3 (8.33%)
Repeater	5 (13.88%)
Issues of paper are clear	10 (27.77%)
Interactions with tutor	2 (5.5%)
Specialized writing	2 (5.5%)
Other (ppt;presentation; script)	14 (38.88%)
Non specified	1 (2.77%)

Memo for the next tutor:	Number of observations
Yes	14 (38.88%)
No	17 (47.22%)

Language used	Number of observations
English	8 (22.22%)
Japanese	6 (16.66%)
Mostly Japanese	1 (2.77%)