Being a tutor and being a teacher in class were two different experiences. On my part, I seemed to approach to my tutee and the students in the team-teaching class differently, and on the students’ part, they also seemed to treat me differently. In my mind, a tutor is close to a helper with whom students can have an intimate relationship and have more individualized feedback due to the nature of learning circumstance and have more flexibility in many ways such as scheduling, the location of sessions, and the topic of study. I guess as a tutor I took challenges and obstacles more personally and more promptly, but the outcomes were not always productive or visible mainly because of the limited time frame and lack of insights in teaching a “person”.

**Communication and defining the relationship**

The first and enduring challenge throughout the whole sessions was how to effectively communicate with the tutee in order to initiate the first tutoring session and continue it. In a way, I feel I almost failed because we couldn’t reach the fifth one. We had our fourth session in December, and it was very unlikely to ask him to show up during the final week. Not surprisingly, my weekly(ended up as a monthly reflection) reflection report always began with rescheduling for various reasons such as an illness, an important test, no reply to my email for more than two weeks, and my being stood up. The truth was I wasn’t offended or annoyed at all, but really wanted to address this nonacademic issue and wondered whether this was part of teaching-learning process and whether this was my responsibility to help him be aware of his behaviors and social skills that might affect his learning experiences. At one point, I came to these questions. “He wouldn’t do that to his professors in any of his classes, would he? Am I
projecting a wrong signal to him? Am I somehow encouraging this colorless relationship? How was I supposed to position myself at the beginning?” I don’t mean that I should have been more strict, authoritative, or uptight which I don’t believe as an image of being a professor. But somehow whatever impressions I made to him really didn’t work out for getting our tutoring rolling. I don’t still have a solution for that. What I am getting at here is that it is sometimes imperative to define the relationship with students depending on teaching contexts and conceptualize my role as a teacher and position myself in a way students can benefit the most. I believe how I present myself to students is as important as and part of what I teach and how I teach.

Needs assessment- the first impression and unrealistic goals

My painful lesson was that the first impression, or the first assessment you make when you meet your student is possibly far from being correct. To be a more precise evaluator, you need to find concrete evidence that support your assumptions and conclusions and never settle down with the first needs assessment. Random words and instant thoughts from your students might not be valid enough to draw on in assessing their needs, the level of motivation, wants, and issues.

In the first tutoring session, unlike his reservation about replying to my email promptly, my tutee eagerly revealed his excitement and gratefulness for this supporting system. Overall, he was a very cheerful, motivated, and inquisitive freshman in college. He attended an international high school in China where he was supposed to speak in English and many of his teachers were native speakers. When I asked him what expectations he had from tutoring, he without any hesitation explained that he was very mathematic-minded so he found leaning a language very
difficult and fundamentally different. In his words, he said he really wanted to learn some stuff in his ESL writing class, but he often got confused and felt he needed a one-on-one guidance.

I concluded the needs assessment with several goals: 1. Help him to realize that he is the one who takes responsible for his learning. As an international student, he needs to make extra effort to improve language skills, such as listening to NPR, reading newspaper, reading books other than his textbooks and find academic resources that help him go through his academic years. 2. Help him to learn how to enjoy writing 3. Become a supporting system for his writing class 4. Help him expose formulaic language and critical reading.

As a starter after our first meeting, I sent a long email to review what we had discussed and give an assignment which was to email me on a regular basis about his day and any new thoughts. He said he was going to do it, but he didn’t. Later, I realized that he couldn’t do it, not “didn’t”. I was not aware of how much gap there was between his oral proficiency and written proficiency until I read his reflection paper in the second meeting. Also, I was not aware of how much basic language skills he needed in grammar and reading comprehension until we sat down and read a newspaper article word by word in our third meeting. It was my misjudgment to think that his overall language abilities would meet a minimum level of language skills, supposedly all balanced, to have gotten into the university, especially graduating from an international high school in China. It was my wrong assumptions that he would make a full commitment or make time for learning English without considering his environments(freshmen, breaking up with his girl friend), absence of real motivation(distraction), learning background(traditional passive learning style).
The primary goals were made around the inaccurate needs assessment and poor assumptions, and each session I had to revise them or completely did something else as a new issue was arisen very explicitly and urgently by the tutee. It was still doable, but there was a surprise after a surprise. I start thinking about the validity of needs assessments. What we see may not be true all the time because we might not catch everything and students might not reveal everything.

**The expectation of the student and the teacher’s beliefs**

In our third meeting, I had two new instructional topics that derived from the second meeting. The first lesson was about exposing him to readings by putting the focus on how other writers articulated and elaborated their ideas and opinions in a creative and meaningful way. Also I planned to show how to find some useful formulaic chunks in readings and adapt them in our language acquisition. The decision was based on the observation of his writing sample in the previous meeting. Another lesson was to learn how to compose academic emails which was directly requested by the tutee at the end of the previous meeting. After the third meeting, I seriously thought about a possible disagreement between his expectations and my own teaching beliefs when I used a more traditional approach for the first time. I “taught” him how to compose an email to a professor more explicitly and in a more limited fashion than I should. He was very satisfied and confident and was successfully able to apply those suggested rules to his real life context. His email sent to me sounded much more appropriate and natural. However, the concept of “depending on contexts” really made him insecure even though he did understood. Watching him respond to the traditional method more actively and seemingly more effectively, I started
questioning myself: What am I missing here? Has he become more confused? What is he expecting from me? Should I treat the symptoms first?

What I had been trying to do with him was to urge him to think and learn on his own. I really wanted him to have a chance to deconstruct his old notions about language learning and recreate a new window to see the English language in a whole new perspective. But I couldn’t dispel a nagging thought that what he realistically needed might be a couple of corrections on his paper so he could have a better score and a pass. For examples, in second meeting I asked him to bring his recital report as a writing sample which he had already submitted. There were a number of major issues from basic grammar needs to meager content to lack of understanding the objectives of the assignment. I didn’t want to spoonfeed him by simply correcting things. First, I talked about some major grammar errors which were repeated throughout the paper and helped him correct them by himself. I believed what was more important was to recognize the gap between his spoken language and written language and have him realize that he could be a creative and critical writer. So I asked him to verbally describe how he felt during the recital as much as he could, hoping he would understand the approach. His description was far more vivid and dramatic than his writing which often went “the music made me feel good..or bad”. I guess I was more impressed by the change than he was. For the next music report, I recommended that he record himself before writing it as brainstorming. I was going to do it during our next session but he had to finish his assignment in a rushed manner right before the deadline by himself without any chance to send it to me for corrections. And I don’t think he could afford to record himself with other tight test schedules.
I feel powerless and lost now. I just wanted to share a little joy of writing with him, not as a pesky, boring assignment. I wanted to help him discover creativity that was hidden somewhere in him. This is a reality I am going to face if I teach in Korea. The needs of students, the needs of society, the needs of school, and the needs of language institution that can’t be compatible with language acquisition will be the biggest challenge. College admission, TOEFL, GRE, and school report cards are the major culprit, but what is more dangerous is our mentality that has been long negotiated around them. I know I can’t transform the rigid system into a new one in four hours. Even I am still in progress doing it myself. I am often shocked by my own closed/inflexible approaches to language even after those eye-opening moments in class. As a Korean teacher, I feel more dedicated to find/learn a way of connecting dots.