

# Approaches to Treating Student Written Errors

Thu H. Tran

Missouri University of Science and Technology

Rolla, Missouri, USA

## Abstract

Second language writing teachers face numerous challenges when providing feedback on student writing. There may be so many problems in the writing that is almost impossible for them to focus on or they may constantly seek a better method of giving feedback on student written errors. This paper attempts to provide second language writing teachers with some key considerations in providing written feedback. To begin with, the author reviews reasons supporting the practice of giving feedback on student written errors. Next, he presents a typology of written errors and discussed different ways of offering corrective feedback. Finally, he summarizes key considerations in giving feedback on student written errors in a table.

## Introduction

Second language writing is a notoriously difficult skill for students to master, and teaching second language writing can be said to be one of the most challenging tasks second language practitioners have to undertake. It is challenging because the amount of time for class preparation and paper grading is overwhelmingly more than classroom instruction time. Further, even more challenging is how to best assist students in their endeavor to learn to write in another language. One question teachers may ask themselves is whether providing corrective feedback helps improve student writing. Some notable authors (Krashen, 1984; Trustcott, 1996) held that

providing error correction is not helpful. In a forty-three page article, Truscott (op. cit.) argued for the abandonment of grammar correction in writing classes. Ferris (1999, 2011), however, maintained that grammar correction is necessary for second language writing acquisition and instruction. She offered the following grounds for giving students grammatical error correction. First, feedback enables students to improve their text. Second, feedback helps students to gain accuracy over time. Third, both teachers and their students see value in giving and receiving error correction feedback. Most importantly, in the real world writing accurately is of great importance. In addition, reviewing research into written corrective feedback, Bitchener (2012) noted that written corrective feedback can help learners to have better control over targeted structures.

Truscott (1996) may be right when noting that too many red marks on students' papers can be quite discouraging for students, but no error correction feedback at all and a low grade on the paper can be equally discouraging. Most language learners seem to expect some kind of feedback on their writing to at least know what the problems are and preferably how to improve them. Students' expectations alone deserve writing teachers' effort to help them to compose accurately and clearly in another language. The next logical question to ask is what some efficacious approaches to responding to student written errors are. How to best respond to student errors plagues both neophyte language classroom practitioners and seasoned second language writing professionals. The issue of treatment of written errors has been widely discussed (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Truscott, 1996; Lee, 1997; Ferris & Robert, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006, 2011; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Sheen, 2007; Sachs & Polio, 2007; Guenette, 2007; Ellis, 2009; Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010). One of the most recent, useful, and comprehensive publications for language teachers on this topic is Ferris

(2011) who devoted 219 pages of her book to addressing fundamental issues in the treatment of error in second language student writing. Due to space limit, this paper can only provide the reader with a brief overview of the issue of treating student written errors.

### **Types of Errors**

Written errors are of many types. In order to easily assist learners in improving their writing, researchers and textbook authors have classified them into the following general categories: global, local, treatable, and untreatable errors.

One dichotomy is global versus local errors (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972; Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Hendrickson, 1978). Whereas global errors refer to those errors that impede comprehensibility of the text, local errors are employed to describe errors that do not impede comprehensibility of the text. The distinction between global and local errors is not fixed and easily described, as one type of error may be a global error in one text but it may also be a local error in another text. The key interpretation depends exclusively on the teacher or reader of the text.

Another dichotomy is treatable and untreatable errors (Ferris, 2011). Whereas treatable errors, according to Ferris, are rule-governed structures such as subject and verb agreement, verb tenses, or capitalization, untreatable errors are “idiosyncratic features” such as word choice or unidiomatic sentence structures.

### **Methods of Giving Written Feedback**

In terms of typology of corrective feedback, Ellis (2009) and Ferris (2011) identified two common dichotomies: direct or indirect feedback and focused or unfocused feedback. When

teachers offer direct written feedback, they provide the corrected version of the erroneous language forms. When teachers give indirect feedback, errors are pointed out, but no corrected versions of the erroneous linguistic forms are offered. Ways of indicating errors vary. As Ferris noted, some popular methods for pointing out erroneous linguistic forms are highlighting the errors using different coded colors (e.g., one color for each common type of error) or simply underlining them. The degree of directness may differ tremendously. While one teacher may just underline the specific problematic words or phrases, another may indicate the sentences in which errors exist and students have to find the errors and correct them. Also, some teachers may give a brief note on what is wrong and how to correct the errors, but other teachers may require students to work on their own or seek further assistance from writing centers or peers to improve the erroneous language forms. Moreover, some teachers may prefer to use metalanguage (e.g., subject, verb, object, article, and preposition) in their feedback. Some others may only use the short forms of such terms such as art (article) and s-v (subject and verb agreement).

As second language teachers are well aware that one piece of writing by a language learner may include so many errors that it may not be possible to correct them in one time, it is important that teachers consider whether to focus on some target structures or correct all errors in a particular piece of student writing. If teachers offer focused feedback, they focus on providing feedback on some specific structures their students have just learned. When teachers provide unfocused feedback, they give feedback on any errors they see in student writing.

## **Key Considerations in Providing Written Feedback**

### **Stylistic Differences versus Errors**

One of the most important considerations for any writing teacher is to determine if a certain paragraph, sentence, phrase, or word needs to be corrected or improved. Ferris (2011) cautioned second language writing teachers against correcting too much, especially when the structures or language being corrected is not erroneous. What teachers need to bear in mind, according to Ferris, is to be cautious of stylistic differences and erroneous linguistic constructions. If student writing is correct but may not be written the way the teacher would write, correction may not be necessary, as there may be differences in composing styles. There may be a fine line between what needs correction and what does not, but it is relatively easy for a teacher to determine if student language is accurate and clear. If the language is correct and the meaning is clear, there is no need for correction. Most advanced learners of a language can easily produce correct language, but the meaning may not be clear to the teacher as a reader. In such a case, it is necessary for students to improve the structures to communicate their meaning more effectively.

### **Error Types versus Feedback Types**

Although written error correction is one of the most widely studied issues in second language writing, it is one of the least understood (Polio, 2012). Brown (2012) indicated that when classroom teachers turn to research for their many questions, it can provide them with few concrete answers about the effectiveness of written corrective feedback. In addition, there is no recipe for corrective feedback (Ellis, 2009; Guenette, 2007), as what may work for one student in one setting may not for another student in another setting (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Available

research on the effectiveness of error treatment seems to be inconclusive. For example, research on the effectiveness of direct versus indirect error feedback shows conflicting results (Ferris, 2006). Ferris also noted that although the majority of researchers think that focused error feedback is better than unfocused error feedback, unfocused feedback in certain cases may be more effective. Learning to write is a daunting task for native speakers of any particular language, as it takes an extensive amount of time and practice to write well. For learners of English as an additional language, learning to write in English is even harder and more time consuming, so it is understandable that it is difficult to determine if one method of providing feedback is more beneficial than another.

Second language researchers once tried to find an effective instructional method, and after much research, no satisfying results have been obtained, as each method and instructional approach may be effective in certain contexts with certain teachers and learners. The many different teaching approaches seem to have provided second language educators with multiple choices to enrich their classroom experience and maximize student learning by utilizing a wide range of activities derived from different teaching methods. In second language writing, each teacher may feel more comfortable with a specific way of giving written feedback due to their beliefs about how languages are learned and taught, and their students, likewise, have their own preferred way of being assisted in learning to write. Teachers need to know how students prefer to be corrected in order to cater to their needs. Also, if teachers are convinced that a particular way of providing error correction is effective for their learners, they may need to tell their students the reasons for such conviction. If teachers try to diversify the way to teach to better serve learners' varied learning styles, they may find it reasonable to try varying the methods of giving written error feedback based on individual students' preferences and language proficiency

because some approaches to error treatment may seem more effective than others depending on the level of students' language proficiency. Beginning learners of a second language, for instance, may benefit more from direct correction feedback when teachers provide the correct language forms for them to correct their erroneous language forms because learners' knowledge of the language may be too limited to benefit from any indirect feedback. Bitchener (2012), in fact, postulated that indirect feedback may be enough for more proficient language learners and that direct feedback might be more beneficial for less proficient language learners due to their limited linguistic repertoire. Additionally, it has been suggested that focused feedback may be more effective for learners with a lower level of proficiency because it may be easier for learners to process the feedback provided (Bitchener, 2012).

For second language writing teachers to better assist their learners in their endeavor to write effectively in a second language, they need to be aware of common error types and available options in treating student written errors. Depending on their own knowledge of their students' preferences, language proficiency, learning goals and situations, they can employ the approach(es) that may work best for their students in their specific contexts. Classroom teachers have to make multiple decisions while grading student writing. Some questions might be:

- Should I focus on just some errors or should I give feedback for any errors I see?
- Is this a global error or is it a local error?
- Is this a treatable error or an untreatable error?
- Should I provide direct feedback or indirect feedback?
- Can this student improve his/her writing based on my feedback?
- What kind of feedback does this student prefer to receive?

Table 1 may be of use to teachers as it shows them some key considerations in providing written feedback. The table summarizes key questions second language writing teachers may need to ask themselves. The table may serve as a guide for writing teachers to effectively provide written feedback. Keeping error types, feedback types, and student language proficiency level as well as their preferred method of receiving corrective written feedback in mind may maximize the effectiveness of written feedback given.

Table 1: Key considerations in offering written error feedback

	Global errors	Local errors	Treatable errors	Untreatable errors	Student level of language proficiency, and preferences
<b>Direct feedback</b>					
<b>Indirect feedback</b>					
<b>Focused feedback</b>					
<b>Unfocused feedback</b>					

Drawing on information processing theories, Bitchner (2012) identified four factors required for corrective feedback to be effective. Firstly, learners have to attend to the feedback offered. Secondly, they need to see the mismatch between their problematic language and the feedback given. Thirdly, they need to be able to retrieve linguistic information from their memory. Finally, they need to be developmentally ready to learn to use the target structures.

### Concluding Remarks

As a learner and teacher of English as an additional language, I have realized how difficult it is to write as well as to teach my students how to write. It is almost impossible for second language students to produce language that is accurate, clear, and complex. However, it is



possible for most second language students to write correctly and clearly by regular and ample practice if they try to keep their language simple enough. The more complex language they try to use, the more likely it is for them to produce erroneous language. When students have had a mastery of the basic syntax and lexicon of the target language, they may then experiment on using more complex language structures. Most teachers may feel bad if they are not able to read all students' writings, and as a result, they assign fewer writing assignments, which actually impedes learners' language development due to lack of ample writing practice. Regardless of how many papers a teacher can read and comment on, students need to write copiously and regularly if they wish to make progress in their writing ability. Just as athletes have to practice thousands of hours intensively to perform well, second language writers are no exception. The more they write, the better they can write. Written feedback may be a facilitating factor in the success of student writing, but it has never been considered the only factor contributing to learners' success in writing. If teachers cannot help their students to write better faster, they can at least make them write more so they can improve on their own. As suggested by Sokolik (2003), one of the principles of teaching writing is providing students with many opportunities to write.

For a second language writing class to be successful, both parties, the teacher and learners, need to actively participate in the learning and teaching process by fulfilling their responsibilities. Learners have to produce writing so that the teachers can help. The teacher needs to offer students with optimal learning conditions by scaffolding the writing process with doable steps to enable students to produce plenty of written language, and when students have managed to create written language, they then are in need of constructive feedback to write more accurately and clearly. In order for second language writing classroom practitioners to give their

students efficacious feedback on their written language, they may find it useful to be cognizant of key considerations in providing written error feedback. Knowing students' types of errors and their level of language proficiency as well as their preferences in receiving feedback can help the teacher to utilize effective methods for offering feedback. There is clearly no best feedback type, but it is beneficial for the teacher to be aware of the range of options from which to choose.

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