

Error Coding Effects on Revision in Generation 1.5 Writing

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As part of the ongoing effort to contribute to the empirical research on error treatment, the authors examined a group of Generation 1.5 writers, all taking an advanced ESL composition class over a period of ten weeks with the same teacher who used a set of grading symbols that narrowly defines grammar errors. The authors decided to study certain types of errors and the way in which they were marked in order to determine how successful these “ear learners” were in correcting errors from a first draft to a final draft and to learn what the implications of such marking might be for teaching grammar in an ESL composition classroom.

The research questions formulated to study this population’s ability to deal with error correction were:

- 1. Are the students in this group more successful at correcting errors that are indicated in some way versus errors that have not been marked?*
- 2. Which errors, when explicitly coded, can they more successfully correct?*

Methods

The study involved an analysis of a corpus composed of student essays from an advanced class in ESL composition in the University of California system. All the essays in the corpus were the final essay for the quarter in order to give the students maximum opportunity to adjust to the writing program’s grading symbols and to master the grammar topics taught during the term. The corpus consisted of pairs of essays: one was the students’ essay drafts written for teacher comment and the other the students’ final version of the same essay. A total of 58 pairs of essays were analyzed. Most of the students who wrote the essays in the corpus had attended school in the United States for a minimum of several years by the time they were enrolled in the class. They had acquired English by using it and had not been exposed to the grammar rules of English during their years attending U.S. schools (a group often referred to as “Generation 1.5”

or “ear learners”).

All essay drafts for comment had been marked by the instructor using standardized grading symbols to indicate the various types of grammar, lexical, and syntactic problems that these students make in the writing, and the students then used these comments when writing their revisions. The instructor also marked those errors remaining in the final draft using the same notation system and assigned a grade for the essay. It was these two drafts that were compared during the study to determine the students’ success in correcting their language errors.

In this study, the authors focused on eight of the approximately 27 errors typically addressed in their program’s error notation system; these covered verb tense, verb form, modals, conditional sentences, word choice, word form, subject-verb agreement, and number (singular/plural). These errors were chosen because they are some of the most frequent errors students make in their writing and are errors addressed in the grammar instruction in the writing class.

In addition to studying students’ success in correcting selected types of errors, the authors investigated whether the instructor’s method of marking the error affected the students’ success and whether it was even necessary for the instructor to mark the error at all. The possible marking variables were: (1) no marking to indicate the presence of an error; (2) the error was indicated only by underlining the incorrect form; (3) the error was indicated by underlining the incorrect form and using a code above the form to indicate the nature of the error; (4) the error was indicated by underlining and also corrected for the student by providing the correct form; (5) the error was indicated by underlining the error and a code was used to indicate the nature of the error but the code used was the wrong one.

Results

When all the errors studied were combined, it was clear that a marked difference existed between student success in correcting errors when the error was indicated in some way by the instructor (77% - 86%), compared to the situation where errors were not indicated in any way in the earlier draft (32%). Tukeys' Studentized Range Test indicated that this difference was statistically significant ($\alpha = .05$) in all cases when these various means of indicating the errors were compared to the situation where the errors were not indicated in any way. As was true with the combined data, when the various error types were considered separately, the most marked difference in success occurred when a comparison was made between the situation when no error was marked and the other situations where the errors were indicated in some way. In this circumstance, the frequency of success in correcting marked and coded errors ranged from 71% - 89% for the eight different error types as compared to a range of 6% - 48% for the same eight error types when the errors were not marked in any way.

Whether or not, when no errors were indicated, some grammatical/lexical errors were more difficult for students to correct than others, it appears that where there was no indication that an error was present, correcting conditional sentences was the most difficult for the students in this study with less than 6% of these errors corrected in the revision compared to 76% successful corrections when the conditional error was indicated and correction symbols used to indicate the type of error.

Discussion/Implications for Teaching

Data from this study indicates that the students benefited greatly from having their errors identified by the instructor in earlier drafts of their writing since they have difficulty discovering their own errors and, if they cannot find their errors, they will not have the opportunity to correct

them. For the population of students in the study, it is clear that the correction method that works best is the one whereby the error is both indicated by underlining the error and using a symbol to indicate the nature of the error. In the writing program at the authors' university, the same correction symbols are consistently used by all instructors and grammar instruction is an integral part of the program. Because of this, it is felt that, in this particular program, marking and providing information about the nature of the error is invaluable to the students when they begin to revise their work. However, it is not clear whether this approach would be as valuable to a population of "ear learners" if they were not being provided with grammar instruction, since many might not know how to address various errors marked using grading symbols. Because "ear learners" acquire English orally, they typically lack knowledge of English grammar and its metalanguage and, without this knowledge, the use of grading symbols without grammar instruction is likely to be ineffective. Thus, the authors feel that their findings point to the need for grammar instruction when teaching Generation 1.5 students because, without it, the students will not have the "tools" they need to progress in their writing.

As to the question of which errors the students experience greater success in correcting, it is clear that those error categories for which there are firm, unequivocal rules (such as number and subject-verb agreement) are easier for the students to address and correct. Issues related to verb tense and conditional sentences are more difficult for the students, even though there are rules to govern these issues, because the rules are more complicated. Finally word choice, including preposition choice, is problematic because there are no rules governing these areas. The authors feel that, in many instances, this is one situation where the students benefit from being provided with the correct answer since this may be the only way they will learn the sometimes subtle usage differences in higher level academic vocabulary as well as learn to make

the correct proposition choices. However, even under these conditions, the authors feel that the answer should be provided only as a last resort and only after the student has been given the opportunity to discover the correct answer.