

Treating ESL Writing Errors: Balancing Form and Content

María Cristina Giraldo de Londoño

macris@utp.edu.co

Ronald Alan Perry

ronald@utp.edu.co

Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira

The general acceptance of Communicative Language Teaching has generated confusion with respect to the role of writing in the ESL curriculum, the usefulness of ESL writing error treatment, and the form that treatment should take. An imaginary conflict between the goals of encouraging students' communicative use of L2 and that of promoting formal correctness often discourages ESL teachers from dealing with writing errors that may be easily treatable during early stages of learning but which, left untreated, continue to affect students' performance at much higher academic levels. By careful application of appropriate techniques, teachers can provide error treatment while promoting habits of self monitoring, revision, and autonomy.

Key words: Error treatment, communicative language teaching (CLT), form-focused instruction

La aceptación generalizada del concepto de la enseñanza comunicativa de los idiomas ha generado confusión con respecto al papel de la escritura en el programa de un curso, la utilidad de la corrección de errores de escritura y la forma como esta se debe realizar. A menudo, el conflicto imaginario entre las metas de animar a los alumnos en el uso comunicativo de la segunda lengua y el fomento del manejo correcto de la misma en cuanto a los aspectos formales, desanima a los docentes para tratar errores que pueden ser fácilmente corregibles durante las fases iniciales del proceso aprendizaje. Si estos no se corrigen, siguen afectando el desempeño de los alumnos en niveles académicos mucho más altos. Mediante la aplicación cuidadosa de técnicas apropiadas, los docentes pueden proporcionar corrección, mientras fomentan hábitos de auto-monitoreo, revisión y autonomía.

Palabras clave: Teoría de errores, enseñanza comunicativa de las lenguas, enseñanza enfocada en la forma

Introduction

ESL writing is frustrating for students to produce and tedious for teachers to correct. Even learners whose oral skills are of a high order typically struggle to express themselves and avoid embarrassing mistakes when writing in English. Teachers, for their part, apply a wide diversity of strategies for dealing with ESL writing errors, more often relying on improvisation and habit rather than on conscious application of theory.

A few decades ago ESL teachers might presume, as did Kenneth Chastain in *Developing Second Language Skills: Theory to Practice*, that “students do not have to acquire as high a level of proficiency in speaking and writing as they do in listening comprehension and reading to be able to function in the language” (1976, p. 365). Such a presumption no longer holds in today’s world of information technology, in which e-mail messages are almost as instantaneous as telephone calls and barriers of distance, nationality and cultural practically non-existent. Today’s professionals, of whatever socio-cultural background, face, on a daily basis, diverse tasks that require formal writing in English.

Nevertheless, it is tempting for ESL teachers to neglect the skills associated with formal writing. The currently fashionable communicative approach to ESL is easily interpreted as prioritizing oral over written production and content over formal correctness. Given the torturous process involved in bringing learners to basic levels of communicative competence, ESL teachers can perhaps be excused for placing formal writing – a problematic skill even for native speakers – low on the list of priorities. The time required for students to produce, and teachers to respond to, such writing is in itself a formidable impediment to its inclusion in the curriculum. Then there is the matter of error treatment. Should writing errors be treated at all? If so, which kinds? How should they be treated?

Concepts of Writing in Language Acquisition Theory

“Language is speech”, claims Leonard Bloomfield (1933). “Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks...” Bloomfield’s writings formed an important theoretical underpinning of the audio-lingual method that dominated foreign language teaching from the 1940’s to the late 1960’s. Writing was seen as, at best, a support for oral language skills and, at worst, a source of needless confusion to beginning learners still struggling with the

acquisition of L2 phonemes and syntax. Audio-lingual methodology deferred writing practice to advanced stages of the L2 acquisition process, introducing it cautiously through controlled activities like copying, dictation, word substitution, and sentence transformation.

A propensity to view writing as merely a support for language learning outlasted the popularity of audio-lingualism. As late as 1983 Ann Raimes, in her book *Techniques in Teaching Writing*, justified the teaching of writing in terms of reinforcing grammatical structures (as cited in Reid, 1993, p. 27). Meanwhile, research on ESL writing remained limited in scope, often adopting paradigms associated with research in L1 writing.

In recent decades, writing has been recognized as a manifestation of language possessing its own distinctive features. As David Crystal (1987, p. 181) notes, writing allows for the transmission of messages to unlimited numbers of recipients; it is non-interactive (i.e. does not allow for negotiation of meaning); and it is relatively permanent (affording writers the possibility of changing and revising and readers the possibility for close reading, reflection, and re-reading). These features, affirms Crystal, combine to produce the carefully structured, compact, and intricate style of communication that characterizes writing.

CLT, which supplanted Audiolingualism during the late 1970's, retained the traditional view of writing as a secondary skill. However, it emphatically rejected Audiolingualism's insistence on strict control of learner language. Whereas Audiolingualism was quite willing to limit learners' freedom to use language expressively in order to limit opportunities for error, CLT viewed error as a normal, positive aspect of a continuous process by means of which learners use L2 expressively from the very beginning while gradually constructing linguistic models that approximate ever more closely the L2 of native speakers. Such a view encouraged interest in students' writing processes. As "process writing" came into vogue, researchers examined students' composing, revising and correcting processes. Nancy Arapoff, Mary Lawrence, and Vivian Zamel were among those who, during the 1970's and early 80's, pioneered this trend (Reid, 1993, p. 319).

Concepts of Error

Communicative Language Teaching brought about radical changes with respect to concepts of error. Whereas audiolingualism sought to deny students even the possibility of committing errors, and cautioned teachers to zealously correct errors

wherever they occurred, CLT saw error as normal, and even desirable, and questioned the practice of error correction (Gray, 2004; Truscott, 1999). Nevertheless, as CLT matured, error's socio-affective aspects and the relative merits of different error treatment strategies began to attract the interest of researchers. Khalil (1985) and Van et al. (1984) studied error-gravity, viewed in terms of the "irritation" or "acceptance levels" of native speakers with regard to specific errors (as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 66), while J. Hendrickson (1980, as cited in Mahili, 1994) examined the conditions in which error treatment might be carried out most effectively.

The efficacy of error treatment continues to be a hotly argued topic among TESOL researchers. Truscott (1999) says bluntly that "...in general, correction should be considered a bad idea". Such criticisms are urged with special force with respect to ESL writing, and most particularly with regard to techniques in which teachers painstakingly mark and comment on all student errors (Gray, 2004; Mantello, 1997; Truscott, 1999). On the other hand, Lyster, Lightbown and Spada (1999), Mantello (1997), and Porte (1993), maintain that it can have some impact on ESL writing attitudes and performance if carried out in a selective, systematic and learner-participative way. In a study by Giraldo and Perry (2005) students were observed, after only two awareness-raising error treatment workshops, conspicuously drawing periods at the ends of sentences and placing third person plural –s markers – often to the point of overcorrecting.

Ellis (1994, p. 205) defines error as "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner". He distinguishes errors from *mistakes*. *Errors* represent misconceptions, lack of information and/or lack of *competence* regarding certain aspects of the target language. Their correction usually requires teacher intervention. *Mistakes*, on the other hand, are incorrect language forms which result when learners forget or misapply rules they know. According to Brown (2000, p. 217), they would be able to correct their mistakes given the opportunity. Mistakes are also referred to as *performance errors* (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p 88).

Corder (1981, p. 10), who is generally credited with the error/mistake distinction, assumes that errors are governed by rules whereas mistakes are not. Errors are, he asserts, manifestations of *interlanguage* (i.e. learners' imperfect mental constructions of the target language) and represent limitations of their L2 competence. Mistakes, on the other hand, are spontaneous events that cannot be explained by rules. Corder declares that "mistakes are of no significance to the process of language learning" (1981, p. 10).

As Ellis (1994, p. 51) points out, Corder's neat distinction between errors and mistakes ignores such complicating factors as the variability of learners' competence. For example, a learner may know a linguistic feature only partially, or know it in one context but not in another. It might be more useful to distinguish mistakes from errors by envisioning a continuum with errors on one end and mistakes on the other. Thus, *errors*, in the strict sense as defined by Corder, would reflect language concepts about which the learner has no knowledge whatsoever or else has incorrect or incomplete knowledge. Moving along the continuum one would find incorrect production due to the learner's having temporarily forgotten or confused L2 concepts with which he/she is nominally familiar. Farther along would be found incorrect utterances that the learner is able to self-correct upon reflection and/or external prompting (consciousness raising). Finally, at the far side – the *mistake* end – of the continuum would be the true *slips of the tongue* that the learner no sooner makes than self-corrects. This suggests a uniform definition of *errors/mistakes* as being incorrect utterances that occur when correct L2 concepts are unknown, unavailable, or unimportant to the learner at a given moment (though he/she may have, at one time or another, been *taught* the relevant features of the target language).

Error and Interlanguage

Learners do not discard their native language in order to acquire another; rather, they construct an additional linguistic code alongside an existing one. Clearly, L1 and L2 acquisition are different (just *how* different is a major theoretical issue). Students necessarily bring to second language learning existing sets of cognitive structures – a phenomenon known as *transfer*.

Transfer is classified by Brown (2000, p. 213) as *inter-lingual* or *intra-lingual* according to whether the learner transfers from L1 to L2 or else from one L2 structure to another. Thus, a Spanish speaker who adds *-s* to English nouns in order to indicate plurality is assumed to be applying inter-lingual transfer. However, when adding the ending *-ed* to an unfamiliar English verb he/she is probably applying intra-lingual transfer. Brown (2000, p. 94-95) further classifies transfer as *positive* or *negative* according to whether it facilitates or hinders target language performance. Thus, the use, by a Spanish speaker, of *-s* to pluralize nouns or *-ed* to indicate past tense of regular verbs would be positive transfer, whereas the error of adding *-s* to adjectives modifying plural nouns or *-ed* to irregular verbs to inflect for past tense would be negative transfer. Negative inter-lingual transfer is alternately described as

interference. Negative intra-lingual transfer, that is to say, the inappropriate application of L2 paradigms, is called *overgeneralization*.

Transfer affects all aspects of language. *Contrastive analysis*, the comparative study of L1 and L2 linguistic features, assumes that similarities between L1 and L2 will result in positive transfer and ease of learning, while differences will result in negative transfer (interference) and L2 errors. From the late 1940's through the 1960's, extensive research in contrastive analysis aimed at identifying points of similarity and difference between native and target languages in order to predict areas of learner difficulty. An important corollary of contrastive analysis theory was that since errors represent the intrusion of L1 habits into the L2 acquisition process, they must be avoided even at the cost of restricting language use. Linguists now consider L1 interference to be less important than previously thought. Still, the fact that errors can be analyzed in terms of learners' conceptual models of the target language (interlanguage) has led to a surge of interest in *error analysis*. Brown (2000, p. 218) distinguishes error analysis (*EA*) from contrastive analysis (*CA*) in that it focuses on errors arising from all possible sources, not just those attributable to L1.

Pedagogical practices may themselves give rise to errors. Teachers or textbooks may give erroneous or misleading explanations, or learners may encounter L2 concepts in contexts that suggest incorrect analogies. These are what Stenson (1974, as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 226) calls *induced errors*. Learners may also use incorrect forms in attempts to circumvent difficult L2 patterns, as when Spanish speakers use "The coat of John" in order to circumvent the more appropriate possessive form, "John's coat". When learners succeed in circumventing difficult L2 forms the result is not error but rather the manifestation of a learner strategy called *avoidance*.

ESL teachers typically view students' L1 in negative terms. According to Brown (2000, p. 95), "We often mistakenly overlook the facilitating effects of the native language in our penchant for analyzing errors in the second language and for over-stressing the interfering effects of the first language". One who has devoted special attention to the positive role of L1 in second language acquisition is J. Cummins, whose hypothesis of *common underlying language proficiency (CULP)* (1983, as cited in Rivera, 1990) holds that the development of literacy and academic skills in L1 is directly related to the development of these same skills in L2. This is to say, in the process of acquiring their native tongue, individuals develop non language-specific linguistic skills and implicit meta-linguistic knowledge that transfer naturally to the acquisition of additional languages.

Error Gravity

Regardless of their causes, errors are significant chiefly with respect to how they affect others. *Error gravity* measures the degree to which different kinds of errors interfere with comprehension and/or provoke negative reactions on the part of listeners or readers. Khalil (as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 66) names three major criteria for determining error gravity: intelligibility, acceptability, and irritation. *Intelligibility* refers to how seriously errors interfere with comprehension, *acceptability* to recipients' judgments as to the relative seriousness of errors, and *irritation* to the emotional responses that errors provoke.

Error gravity is determined not only by the kind of error committed but also by its frequency, the circumstances in which it is committed, the identity of the one committing it, and the type of person(s) judging it. Studies such as that of Roberta Vann and her colleagues (1984, as cited in Reid, 1993, p. 36) indicate that non-ESL academics judge some kinds of errors as more serious than others, errors of word order being regarded as the most serious and spelling errors the least. According to Ellis (1994, p. 66), natives tend to be more concerned with how errors affect comprehension and non-natives with non-adherence to rules. Davies (as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 66) adds that non-native language teachers are influenced in their judgment of errors by considerations of syllabi and knowledge of students' L1. Thus, they view transfer errors with tolerance, but have less patience with errors in grammatical structures that students are supposed to have learned.

Writing errors tend to be judged more severely than similar errors occurring in speech. For example, the speech of a visiting foreign professor, though it might be marked by a thick German accent and curious turns of speech, will detract nothing from his academic prestige, whereas a thesis written by this same professor and containing misspelled words, uninflected verbs and inappropriate syntax, will provoke disgust. Moreover, intelligibility as well as acceptability must be considered. Speech errors that might be compensated for by intonation, gestures, and other non-verbal clues may seriously compromise the intelligibility of written discourse. For example, incorrect addition or omission of the third person singular *-s* can affect meaning, given the phoneme's parallel function as a pluralizing marker for nouns. Misplaced relative clauses can, likewise, result in ambiguity ("The *Titanic* struck an iceberg carrying 2000 passengers to New York"). The predominance of monosyllabic lexemes in English, and the fact that these monosyllables often do multiple service, may combine with careless punctuation to confuse meaning in ways that would be

less likely to occur in other languages. In her popular book, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: A Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, Lynne Truss (2003) cites some amusing examples of utterances that lend themselves to gross misinterpretation due to erroneous punctuation.¹ It may be added that, if readers often miss writers' intended meanings, so do the correction features of word processing programs.

Writing errors can lead to annoyance and misunderstanding in ways that speech errors do not. In written discourse (much more than in speech) correct form matters.

What then, is correct form? Prescriptive definitions of error derive from the notion of *prescriptive grammar*, which consists of formal rules of correctness prescribed by recognized authorities. Whereas cognitive descriptions of error focus on learners' inaccurate mental models of the target language and socio-linguistic descriptions on recipients' reactions to non-standard utterance, prescriptive descriptions speak of errors in terms like "subject-verb agreement", "missing copula", "sentence fragment", etc. In many languages, rules of usage are set by an official language academy. In the case of English, linguists and textbook writers determine accepted usage in terms of those forms current among prestigious speakers and writers. Thus, the ever-popular, *Harbrace College Handbook* "attempts to describe the usual practice of good contemporary writers" and states that its rules "have authority only to the extent that they describe usage." (Hodges & Whitten, 1972, p. X).

Prescriptive descriptions of error may be subdivided into such categories as pronunciation, mechanics (including spelling and punctuation), diction (dealing with questions of lexis, register and appropriacy), grammar, cohesion, etc.

The existence of textbooks to guide native speakers in the correct use of their mother tongues calls into question the definition of error as "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker" (Brown, 2000, p. 217). One may ask, "*Which* native speaker(s)?" Implicit is the assumption that L1 speakers have perfect command of their native language and agree as to correct usage. However, a 2001 study of Spanish students in Caqueta, Colombia, found that native Spanish speakers showed serious difficulties with respect to such formal aspects as punctuation, tenses, textual references and connectors, (Quiroga, Jiménez, & Rojas, 2001, p. 147). The problematic nature of native speaker norms as standards of reference is well illustrated by the use, in Colombian Spanish, of commas instead of periods to

1 The title refers to the text of a brochure about pandas. The text intends to say that the panda eats shoots and leaves, but the misplaced commas represent the animal as eating, firing a weapon, and walking away.

separate sentences within a paragraph, a frequent practice even among academic writers. Does popular usage, or rather, the prescriptions of the *Real Academia Española*,² represent correct Spanish? While learners transfer into English norms of punctuation they regard as correct in Spanish, ESL teachers assume the use of periods and commas to be similar in both languages and so fail to recognize this as an interference error.

Formal errors take on more – not less – importance as learners develop greater L2 communicative competence. Precisely because they do not seriously impede communication, such errors may easily become fixed elements of learners' interlanguage, a phenomenon known as *fossilization*. Research indicates that “in mostly meaning-based instructional environments [learners] seem to reach a plateau in the formal accuracy of their language use while their communicative effectiveness continues to grow” (Lightbown & Spada, as cited in Gabrielatos, 1994).

Approaches to Error Treatment

The ponderous nature of writing – in contrast to the spontaneous nature of speech – makes the distinction between errors and mistakes especially problematical. What of students who turn in papers with features such as incorrect forms of *to be*, inverted adjective-noun word order and incomplete punctuation, even when they have been told their work will be graded and have been urged to proofread? Usually they will recall, with only slight prompting, having learned the correct forms. If mistakes are, as Corder (1981, p. 11) claims, fortuitous events having no rational basis, then it makes little sense to talk of strategies for dealing with them. However, if they are the result of cognitive, affective or circumstantial factors that impede the mind's access to L2 rules, then it should be possible to help learners to improve their performance by means of specific techniques aimed at reinforcing these rules.

Spoken errors – even if they go uncorrected – are ephemeral, whereas unmarked writing errors stand as tangible reminders of teachers' failure to act. This fear of leaving students in possession of unmarked written errors explains, no doubt, why so many ESL teachers weary themselves red-penning corrections they know will probably not be read. Teachers, of course, employ other techniques such as

2 The *Real Academia Española* (1973, p. 148) prescribes the use of a periodo “cuando el periodo [sic] forma sentido completo, en términos de poderse pasar a otro nuevo sin quedar pendiente la comprensión de aquel”.

discussing general writing problems in class and conferring (“conferencing”) individually with students. Self and peer correction are sometimes combined with the use of checklists or coded feedback. However, regardless of the techniques employed, they tend, according to Zamel (1985, as cited in Mantello, 1997, p. 88) “to be random and arbitrary instead of being based on a clear and focused strategy”.

According to Allwright and Bailey (1991, p. 88-89), error treatment may take the form of *error repair*, which concerns the immediate rectification of specific utterances in the interest of communication and/or linguistic correctness, or *error cure*, which aims at helping the learner avoid the repetition of erroneous utterances and acquire correct forms.

A distinction is also made between *local errors*, which occur at the level of lexis or syntax, and *global errors*, which involve more complex processes and occur at higher levels of discourse. Whereas the former are easier to detect and repair, it is usually the latter which more seriously interfere with communication.

In the 1967 movie *Up the Down Staircase*, a student writes a love letter to her English teacher, who then calls the girl aside to coldly discuss the letter’s grammatical errors. Shortly afterward, the girl jumps from a window, dramatizing the cliché of teachers’ obsessive focus on form and insensitivity to content. Robertson (1986, as cited in Simpson, 2003) advises teachers to react emotionally to students’ writing (“How exciting that must have been!”) or share like experiences (“That reminds me of when I...”). Such responses easily become silly or patronizing (“I agree! Your grandmother’s life support system ought to have been disconnected...”). ESL teachers, however humanistic their orientation, assign writing tasks not so much to elicit students’ feelings, experiences and opinions as to make them practice writing. In any case, attempts to divorce form from content are problematical. Invitations and business letters, for example, achieve their purpose as much by careful attention to form as by any information they may convey.

Concepts about the value of error correction reflect diverse theoretical approaches to second language acquisition. Krashen (1983, p. 30-38) describes language acquisition as an unconscious process whereby the learner is exposed to, and comes to understand, *comprehensible input* (i.e. controlled samples of the language). In his view, conscious attempts to draw learners’ attention to formal aspects of the language serve, at best, to improve students’ ability to *monitor* (self-correct) language they have essentially mastered, and, at worst, to raise the *affective filter* – a collection of negative feelings that blocks the spontaneous processes of acquisition. Languages

are, according to Krashen, learned by receiving and understanding messages, not by producing them. Thus, error treatment is of little or no value in terms of language acquisition.

Communicative language teaching grudgingly accepts the validity of error treatment but takes a critical view of it. Chastain (1976, p. 365) writes, "...although correct speech is the goal, the native speaker can fill in the gaps and comprehend the message if there are not too many errors. A point of incomprehensibility does, of course, exist. ...the goal in the productive skills is not native speech but the ability to communicate with native speakers." CLT tends to equate error treatment with discredited "traditional" methodologies. Writers like Truscott (1999) claim that error treatment is non-communicative, since it distracts attention from writers' messages, and useless, since research shows it to be ineffective.

Error Treatment Strategies

TESOL literature has been especially critical of comprehensive error treatment techniques, in which all errors are painstakingly highlighted and the correct forms provided. Leki (1991, as cited in Mantello, 1997, p. 204) states categorically that, "marking errors on students' papers does not help them improve their writing nor eliminate their errors". However, a rich diversity of error-treatment strategies exists. The most promising ones incorporate concepts of form-focused instruction and consciousness-raising.

Form-Focused Instruction (FFI)

It is defined by Spada (1997, as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 233) as "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly". Ellis (1994, p. 639) distinguishes "instruction focused on form", in which students' attention is drawn to form while engaged in communicative tasks, from "instruction focused on forms" in which students study linguistic forms in the context of a structural syllabus.

Form-focused instruction resembles, in some ways, the discredited practices of grammatical explanations, presentation of rules, and grammar drills. However, DeKeyser (1995, as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 234) points to research suggesting that FFI can be effective in improving learners' production, especially when dealing with rules that are easily stated.

Consciousness-Raising (or Awareness-Raising)

It is described by Ellis (1994, p. 643-644) as aiming to help learners perceive and formulate cognitive representations of target language structures. It does not necessarily require learners to produce target language forms but can be valuable in helping them monitor their communicative output. Consciousness-raising is forward-looking; by helping students anticipate and monitor their errors, it opposes the traditional practice of working backward from a “bloodstained” teacher-corrected text (Porte, 1993). By enabling students to predict, and then notice mistakes and errors, observes Porte, consciousness-raising shifts onto the students the responsibility for checking and improving written work.

Form-focused instruction and consciousness-raising techniques can be combined in a variety of specific techniques. Among the most common are the following:

- *Elicitation*, defined by Wright (1987, p. 70) as an instructional mode by which “teachers probe the learners through close questioning in order to bring previously acquired knowledge to the surface”.
- *Selective error correction*; that is, “correcting a limited number of language structures consistently and persistently over a period of time” (Mantello, 1997). A variation of this technique is the *Step-by-step approach* in which a different kind of error is checked for each time a composition is read.
- *Coded feedback* involves indicating the location and the nature of errors, leaving it to students to do the actual correcting.
- *Reformulation*, a technique advocated by Cohen (1990, as cited in Mantello, 1997), involves having a native L1 speaker rewrite a learner’s composition so that errors of mechanics, grammar and vocabulary are corrected.
- *Self-correction/ checklists* permit students to correct their own work using tables that enumerate (but do not explain) linguistic elements to be monitored.
- *Peer review* takes advantage of the public nature of writing and the novelty inherent in having one’s work corrected by others.
- *Error-Correction Games* appeal to students who enjoy searching out discrepancies.
- *Conferencing* refers to personalized student-teacher discussions that aim to understand and treat writing difficulties. They have the double advantage of providing valuable information to teachers while permitting students to

explain and defend their work (Simpson, 2003). Lynch and Klemens (1978, as cited in Simpson, 2003) claim that error correction is ineffective unless it is done in person.

- *Collaborative writing* involves forming small groups of students for generating ideas, gathering and organizing sources, peer reviewing, and mutual advising.
- *Process writing* is not so much a technique as a general approach that treats writing as a process involving a progression of steps such as generation of ideas, elaboration of drafts, revision and reformulating. This approach emphasizes the distinction between product (the finished piece of writing) and the process by which teachers assist writers to share, evaluate, and revise their work through a cyclical series of steps (Gabrielatos, 2002). Simpson (2003) makes the important observation that “the teacher should refrain from giving a grade until the student has had a chance to revise” while Gabrielatos (2002) advises that feedback should focus on a limited number of elements so as to avoid confusing students.

All of these techniques lie along a continuum that places them nearer to, or farther from, such traditional practices as grammar explanations, use of display questions, product writing, etc. But all of them actively involve learners in the error-treatment process.

The Effectiveness of Error Treatment

Error treatment of ESL writing is a slow, uneven, and often frustrating process. Nevertheless, learner participative, awareness-raising techniques focused on carefully selected errors can achieve immediate, quantifiable results, especially where simply stated linguistic rules can be invoked. In a study carried out at a Colombian university, ESL students were observed, after only two workshops, to begin conspicuously drawing periods at the ends of sentences (Giraldo & Perry, 2005).

Teachers worry – with good reason – that students will take all utterances not marked with red ink to be correct, and perhaps even adopt these erroneous utterances as models. Such thinking needs to be reconsidered, seeing as the common practice of annotating all errors is prohibitively time consuming for teachers and of dubious value to students (Mantello, 1997; Porte, 1993). Teachers, if they are not to be overwhelmed, must devise procedures for focusing on selected errors while consciously ignoring others. Should teachers begin the error treatment process by

focusing on form (putting off for a time the correction of higher level errors) or vice-versa?

Attention to formal errors is open to criticism as a reversion to “traditional” methodology, with its fetish for formal correctness and disregard for “communication”. Yet if the aim is to improve students’ writing, does it not make sense to begin with those errors that most readily lend themselves to treatment? Though writing (like speaking) involves a variety of high order skills, it also calls for attention to mechanics and grammar, habits that, if not acquired early, must necessarily take up learners’ time and attention later.

This is not to say that error treatment should primarily concern itself with formal correctness, as though it were the most important aspect of writing. By treating problems of form at basic levels, teachers can help free students to focus more and more on content as their writing skills evolve. A focused effort toward the improvement of writing skills, in terms of both form and content, should be an integral part of ESL instruction at all levels, including that of pre-graduate and postgraduate language teacher education.

Conclusion

An informed, systematic approach to error treatment attempts to set students on the long road to autonomy as writers. The aim is not to train students to correct errors that teachers highlight for them, nor is it to improve their writing to the point that they no longer commit errors (an unrealistic goal even for L1 writers). Rather, it is to help students view writing as a constructive process involving much more than the consigning of ideas to paper, and to empower them to take charge of their own revision, self-monitoring and self-correction processes (Porte, 1993, p. 43).

ESL teaching and, in particular, the teaching of ESL writing, is seriously handicapped to the extent that L1 literacy skills are underdeveloped. Not only do students tend to regard details such as punctuation and use of capital letters as unimportant, they often fail to detect mechanical errors even when directed specifically to check for them. Though common sense suggests that time and effort invested in improving native language skills is time stolen from foreign language learning, studies of children enrolled in bilingual programs in the United States demonstrate that promoting native language proficiency facilitates the acquisition of foreign language skills (Cummins 1999).

That many common writing errors result from students' failure to apply native language and English language concepts supposedly learned and re-learned in high school suggests awareness-raising and form-focused techniques as promising approaches to treatment. That these techniques can be effective is demonstrated by the phenomena of over-correction mentioned by Truscott (1999). Far from being, as he assumes, undesirable consequences of error correction processes, they furnish proof of students' newly acquired awareness.

Criticism that error treatment generates anger, frustration, or confusion with regard to EFL writing contradicts not only a considerable amount of SLA research but also the experience of thousands of ESL teachers in diverse parts of the world. Students ask for correction and respond positively when it is given (Leki, as cited in Mantello, 1997). Teachers must, of course, create positive, risk-friendly learning environments, encouraging students to take risks and to accept errors with patience and humour. In this respect, "imported" teachers' flawed proficiency in students' L1 and their willing acceptance of correction may be of great exemplary value in helping students accept their own limitations and confront with confidence and determination the challenge of learning a second language.

References

- Allwright, D., & Bailey, K. M. (1991). *Focus on the language classroom*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloomfield, L. (1933). *Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (4th ed.). New York: Longman.
- Chastain, K. (1976). *Developing second language skills: Theory to practice* (2nd ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error analysis and interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cummins, J. (1999). Beyond adversarial discourse: Searching for common ground in the education of bilingual students. In C. J. Ovando & P. McLaren (Eds.), *The politics of multiculturalism and bilingual education: Students and teachers caught in the cross-fire* (pp. 126-147). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gabrielatos, C. (1994). Minding our ps. *Current Issues*, 3, 5-8. Retrieved July 25, 2008, from <http://www.gabrielatos.com/PPP.pdf>
- Gabrielatos, C. (2002). *EFL writing: Product and process*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED476839). Retrieved December 16, 2008, from ERIC database.
- Giraldo, M. C., & Perry, R. A. (2005). *Treating writing errors of low-to-intermediate EFL university students*. Unpublished master's thesis, Universidad de Caldas, Colombia.

- Gray, R. (2004). Grammar correction in ESL/EFL writing classes may not be effective. *The TESOL Journal*, *X* (11). Retrieved July 25, 2008, from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Gray-WritingCorrection.html>
- Hodges, J. C., & Whitten, M. E. (1972). *Harbrace college handbook* (7th ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Krashen, S., & Terrell, T. (1983). *The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. Hayward, CA: The Alemany Press.
- Lyster, R., Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (1999). A response to Truscott's "What's wrong with oral grammar correction". *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *55* (4), 456-467.
- Mahili, I. (1994). Responding to student writing. *English Teaching Forum*, *32* (4), 24-27.
- Mantello, M. (1997). Error correction in the L2 classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *54* (1), 127-132.
- Pakula, A. J. (Producer), & Mulligan, R. (Director). (1967). *Up the down staircase* [Motion picture]. U.S.A.: Warner Bros.
- Porte, G. K. (1993). Mistakes, errors, and blank checks. *English Teaching Forum*, *31* (1), 42-44.
- Quiroga, A., Jiménez, H., & Rojas, G. (2001). *La enseñanza de la lengua materna en el Caquetá: Estado actual y alternativas de transformación*. Florencia, Caquetá: Universidad de la Amazonía, Colciencias, BID.
- Real Academia Española. (1973). *Esbozo de una nueva gramática de la lengua española*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe.
- Reid, J. M. (1993). *Teaching ESL writing*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Rivera, K. (1990). *Developing native language literacy in language minority adults*. Washington D.C.: National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED358747). Retrieved July 25, 2008, from ERIC database.
- Simpson, JoEllen. (2003). Responding to our students' writing: what is good for us and for them? *HOW*, 2003 issue, Vol. 10, pp. 45-52
- Truscott, J. (1999). What's wrong with oral grammar correction. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *55* (4). Retrieved August 6, 2005, from <http://www.hss.nthu.edu.tw/~fl/faculty/John/What%27s%20Wrong%20with%20Oral%20Grammar%20Correction%201999.htm>
- Truss, L. (2003). *Eats, shoots and leaves. The zero tolerance approach to punctuation*. London, U.K.: Profile Books.
- Wright, T. (1987). *Roles of teachers and learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The Authors

María Cristina Giraldo holds a B.Ed. in modern languages from Universidad del Quindío and a master's degree in TESOL from Universidad de Caldas. She has been working with English language learners for 29 years. Her research interests include second language literacy among Colombian English pre-service teachers and the application of new technologies to language teaching. She is currently an associate professor working with the English Language Teaching program at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira in Colombia.

Ronald Alan Perry holds a master's degree in TESOL from Universidad de Caldas. He has taught English at bilingual schools in Manizales and Pereira and is currently an associate professor working with the English Language Teaching program at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira. He wrote a course textbook on Anglophone Civilization and has also published articles on African American English and foreign language acquisition.