Effective Error Engagement in Academic ESL Writing

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Abstract

Do you spend a lot of time editing papers only to see limited improvement in your students’ writing and editing skills? This 2015 MIDTESOL presentation and resulting paper introduces approaches to get high intermediate and advanced ESL writers thinking about and noticing their own error patterns, as well as boosting their writing confidence. These strategies have resulted in less time spent marking each student’s essay and an increased student awareness and participation of the students with their own personal error patterns throughout both the proof-reading and writing processes, better preparing them for success in their regular credit-writing classes at the university level.

For many writing teachers, students hurrying to get their drafts written and turned in on time and the teacher spending well-intended hours with the drafts providing guided feedback and explicit correction as necessary is a common cycle. Drafts are passed back and, other than from the explicit corrections, improvements in the next (and even final) draft are limited. The teacher does most of the proof-reading work, essentially allowing the student to avoid noticing and internalizing error patterns.

Being able to notice an error or mistake and correct it is a part of good proof-reading, and good proof-reading skills need to be explicitly taught and practiced (Guénette 2012). Often times, students come from an educational context where English writing errors are explicitly corrected, and go into an IEP expecting (and usually experiencing) the same. Written corrective feedback (WCF) on a writing assignment is generally expected by students to not only point out the error or mistake, but to especially demonstrate how to improve them (Tran 2013). To meet this expectation
and because of the role of “corrector” that has traditionally been applied to the profession, teachers tend to spend a lot of their time and ink on explicit WCF in student writing; we as teachers often have a strong desire to provide “correctness.” Although current trends have been pushing towards a more communicative teaching approach, Hashimoto (2004) noted in her study on ESL treatment of errors that, nevertheless, teachers’ overwhelming practice of explicit error correction reflects the more traditional mindsets of favoring linguistic accuracy.

In my own experience studying Spanish, Japanese, and currently Russian classes at our university, I noticed that, as a language-instructor and language-learning-lover, even I was not internalizing ANY of WCF that was returned to me on my Russian writing assignments. In fact, I barely even read it. What a waste of time for my instructor (who spent all the time marking) and for me (who won’t actually benefit from those mistakes in order to improve her second language writing). This got me thinking about my own (traditional) editing habits, and how I could draw upon my experiences as a language-learner in order to not only improve the quality of WCF I was giving my students, but to reduce my own time devoted to editing in the process.

Students (myself included) are used to teachers correcting mistakes, so they don’t have to be involved with them much. Teachers in both the students’ home countries AND here in the U.S. have unintentionally shown them that it’s okay to be lazy and not even read over one’s own work.
because the teacher will just fix it anyway (resulting in us spending hours of our own precious time doing the “learning” for the students!). However, research has shown that this cycle of explicit correction is not really effective, especially considering how much time teachers often dedicate to it, and how little time students give to internalizing it. In addition, Hashimoto (2004) reinforces Truscott’s (1996) notion that receiving a paper filled with red ink can have negative effects on students’ writing confidence, motivation, and effort.

In addition to the time wasted on editing and the missed opportunities for learning, I also felt that my own ELL writing students were at a disadvantage more so than their American peers in their university writing courses. Often times, their writing errors in English impede meaning or are distracting in their repetitiveness, and get in the way of improving writing content since much of the editing of their essays comes in the form of local errors rather than globalized ones. Most American students already come to college with basic proofreading skills (a notion that is not emphasized as much in some cultures) and can generally catch many of their local errors and mistakes, leaving the teacher free to focus on their content, organization, and overall development of their thesis and writing style. In Responding to L2 Students in College Writing Classes: Teacher Perspectives, Ferris, et. al. (2011) found that not only did university instructors focus most of their writing feedback to L2 learners on their language errors over ideas and content, but some of them often harbored a resentment towards the idea of the extra grammar-focused work that the ELLs tended to bring with them. Our ELL students are many times encouraged to visit the writing center, whose workers also tend to focus on correcting or providing feedback on local errors as they are more easily fixable and make up the majority of a student’s paper. Because of these practices, our students often miss out on the feedback and guidance that could make them stronger and more critical academic writers because so much time and energy is focused on primarily addressing their linguistic needs.
Taking all of these things into consideration, I set out to transform my traditional editing cycle of this:

... into something more like this:

My classroom goals

During my writing classes last year, and especially during the semester that I had three credit writing classes of 18 students each, I wanted to see if the writing/revising process could be changed (not only for my own time’s sake, but also for the sake of meaningful learning for the students) as well as to achieve particular goals which I thought would most benefit the students:

- Create successful editing and proofreading habits for students so that they can better focus on content and rhetorical modes in their later academic writing endeavors.
- Get students to actively notice their most common error patterns so that they can take steps to think about and reduce them.
- Have students play a more active role in the drafting process (rather than having me do most of the editing/correcting work for them)
The Process

One of my main objectives with this experiment was to give back some of the power that students often lose through the teacher/student relationship where the teacher possesses an authoritative, facilitating, and evaluating role in the classroom, and the students write based on the understanding of that position (Hyland, 2000). By giving back more of that authority to the students, as well as giving them increased autonomy as facilitators and evaluators through effective error engagement, I hoped to achieve my above-mentioned goals. Each essay unit’s “error engagement” was divided up into four different parts, all of which were important steps in getting students to both interact with and benefit from their errors and mistakes.

Part 1: Collaborative correction

After receiving second or final drafts of essays, I took one incorrect sentence from EACH student’s final essay and typed each one completely and anonymously so that we had a worksheet of 18 incorrect sentences in list formation. I made sure to choose a variety of the types of errors presented (comma splices, subject-verb agreement, spelling, run-ons, etc.), and especially made sure to include errors that were most frequently made by the class or by a particular language-group as a whole.

During class time and in small groups (I found groups of three to work the best), students spent time going through and talking about how to correct each sentence. One of the nicer things about this activity is even the weakest students in class will be able to correct some of the most obvious and careless mistakes, while the more advanced students will appreciate the challenges of trying to figure out some of the crazier sentence structures. We devoted one class period to this activity, spending the last fifteen minutes or so looking at each sentence on the board and correcting them as a class.
The results of this activity are that it:

- Shows that EVERY person in class makes mistakes
- Lets shyer students remain anonymous, while allowing more outspoken students to laugh at themselves
- Results in almost 100% student engagement and participation—in small groups, students can argue, work through, and sometimes even agree on all corrections. If as a group they still don’t come up with the right correction, they have all still spent some time talking and thinking about possible solutions (noticing!)
- Reinforces the idea that not only are mistakes natural, but we CAN actually actively learn from them!

Part 2: Different approach to editing

The editing process on my part is not a novel concept, it’s just going through and circling errors and mistakes, which can be done rather quickly (a lot faster than writing the correct answer for each one) and has cut my essay editing time in half!

I’ve found that with my high intermediate and advanced students, at the beginning of the semester especially, many errors are things students already know how to fix and are a result of poor (or non-existent) proof-reading. There will, however, be some things for which they will need a hint as to what the problem is because they either haven’t learned the form yet, have learned it and forgotten it, or have fossilized the incorrect usage, so I do give hints where I feel they are needed.
For the first part of the semester, as I’m trying to establish a solid and regular proof-reading habit within the students, I will usually circle almost every error and mistake. As the semester wears on and the students proof-reading generally becomes more careful, I become more selective in my circling, focusing on only errors that impede meaning or occur frequently. Recent trends in research have been pointing to selective WCF as being most beneficial to students, and I’ve noticed that my own students have had better success when they’re only focused on between three and four error types at a time.

Part 3: Recording errors and looking for patterns

Through using an error-recording worksheet to record and correct circled essay errors, students become more actively involved in the reasoning behind and correction of their errors, making learning from them more likely. When students (rather than their teachers) have to do more work to interact with each error made, they not only start to realize their own particular trouble areas, but are also more motivated to avoid careless mistakes in writing their drafts (Truscott 2007). After handing back the essay drafts with the circled errors in class, I give students about ten minutes to begin recording their errors on their error recording sheets, with the idea that they will complete the task then at home. After doing this the FIRST time, they quickly learn that whereas it only takes five minutes to read through the essay and proof-read for what I call “silly mistakes,” recording all circled errors and mistakes on the record sheet could take them a couple of hours! In my experience, this is one of the best lessons ever in the importance of proof-reading, and almost all of the students take extra time reading their essays aloud to reduce their silly mistakes before handing the draft into me!

For intermediate and some advanced levels, I use the first “Writing Self-Assessment” sheet where they just tally-up their mistakes and give an example of each. On the back, they then reflect on those errors. For lower-level classes, you could adapt this to only focus on two-three main error
problems (or even have different sheets for different L1 groups and the problems that are specific to each).

| Punctuation | Everybody think that someone who participate very activity is an excellent student. 
| Subject/verb agreement | Somebody think that someone who participate very activity is an excellent student. 
| (third person singular "s") | Everybody think that someone who participate very activity is an excellent student. 
| Verb tense | If the student don't focus on the class, they can't be understand. the whole lecture and couldn't follow it. 
| Singular/plural nouns | If the student don't focus on the class, they can't be understand. the whole lecture and couldn't follow it. 
| Pronoun | Have you ever think about the time when you want to see somebody. 
| Preposition | Furthermore, it can be affect to the student's feeling. 
| Word form | If second reason, because of lazy, it doesn't have an idea to give them an answer. 

(front excerpt from student work)

1. As you reread your essay and look at the corrections, what were the strengths of this essay? 
   I think I good at subject/verb agreement and pronoun. Because I don't have many mistake about it.

2. What are areas that you need to improve for your next timed writing assignments? 
   I need to improve verb tense, spelling and preposition.

3. What was the most difficult part of this writing assignment? 
   The most difficult part of this writing assignment is Introduction. 
   If you don't have ideas for the Introduction, you can not write the body and conclusion.

4. What will you do differently next writing assignment (both before and during the writing)? Set your intentions for the next timed writing assignment. I will... 
   In next writing, I will try to use preposition, conjunction and word tense well. I will write fast in order to have time.

(back excerpt from student work)

For my more advanced pre-composition English writing classes (which many of our ESL students take before general freshman composition at the university), I use the "Personal Error Patterns Chart," adapted from Evergreen: A guide to writing with readings (Fawcett, 2010); See
Appendix for sample of the full blank chart). Instead of merely tallying, students must label, correct, and write the rule or a reminder for each circled error, even if it repeats (and especially so).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fragments</td>
<td>So we need to learn what is the cause of cancer,</td>
<td>We need to learn what is the cause of cancer,</td>
<td>Delete the “So” sentence can not stand with “So.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>Nerved, on the other hand, people look down upon us a little bit.</td>
<td>Nerved, on the other hand, people look down upon us a little bit.</td>
<td>Use “be” verb and past tense.</td>
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<td>-be verb</td>
<td>They perceived in the society.</td>
<td>They were perceived in the society.</td>
<td>A -be verb need to be added before verbs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>They have much more powerful in the society.</td>
<td>They have much more powerful in the society.</td>
<td>Adjective need to be noun.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>An registered nurse already require 2 years of school.</td>
<td>A registered nurse already require 2 years of school.</td>
<td>Needs to be past tense.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>If somebody has a heart attack and falls out…</td>
<td>If somebody has a heart attack and falls out…</td>
<td>Third person need to be a &amp; often verbs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>From</td>
<td>That is the fact and the truth.</td>
<td>That is the fact and the truth.</td>
<td>Adjective need to change to noun.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fragments</td>
<td>Also, help patient clean up bed sheets, changing bedding, eating, or food, clothes, or their job.</td>
<td>Changing bedding, making bed sheets, eating, bedding, or food, clothes, or their job.</td>
<td>Also, not a complete sentence.</td>
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(excerpt from student work)

With both types of error recording sheets, students can easily look through and see what their most common error patterns are. It’s a lot less daunting to focus on a few error patterns and correct them than to just see an essay of 30 different problems to try and tackle (of course, once again, the exception to this is at the beginning of the semester when I’m circling almost all errors/mistakes in order to cultivate the need and importance of proofreading). These error pattern sheets are included in the grading rubric for each essay.

Often times, students will encounter a circled error and not understand how to label or correct it, even after a “hint” has been given. Instead of having a whole class of hands raise in the air for me to come and help define errors, I encourage students to follow the following “four-step process” for seeking their own answers:
If you don’t know how to label/correct the error you’ve made...

- First, “open your mind” and search through all the previous grammar knowledge you’ve been taught that’s hiding somewhere in your brain. If it’s not there, then...
- “Open your grammar/writing book” and see if you can find your particular problem/rule. If that doesn’t work...
- Then, “open your mouth” and ask your neighbor or a friend in class who you think might be able to help you. If nothing...
- Finally, “open up” and ask me, your instructor for additional guidance.

Part 4: Conferences and reflective blogging

In their study on L2 written corrective feedback, Ferris, et. al. (2013) found that a more personalized approach to feedback through individual conferences and focused discussion was valuable in that it added relevance, clarity, and motivation in the error correction process, something the students in their study said they did not receive in their previous English instruction. Hyland reinforces this idea by stating that there is a “need for teachers and students to communicate on a one to one basis, not just about texts and writing problems, but also about approaches to writing and learning and feedback strategies” (2000). Incorporating that idea into my own ESL writing classroom is the last and equally important part of effective error engagement.

During our writing classes, we have individual conferences during mid semester and, if the class warrants, again towards the end of the semester. I first have students hand in their error sheets a week before conferences so that I can look for discrepancies in their error labeling to circle and talk about. During the conference, I have the student talk to me about the most common error patterns noticed on the sheets, how he or she is tackling them, and if they’re still having any troubles understanding them. I make sure to provide enough opportunity for the student to explain any challenges or concerns they’re having with the writing process, and give them encouragement and strategies to help them work through those obstacles.

Secondly, I have the students do a lot of self-reflection over their errors through their own personal blogs (which they set up on the Internet through Blogger, Wordpress, or Tumblr). They usually do four reflective blog posts on their errors throughout the semester, specifically talking
about their most prevalent patterns, how they are improving upon them, any surprises they’ve had, and finally (at the end of the semester) which patterns they greatly reduced (it’s no longer a guessing game—with the error pattern sheets, they can visually see what they’ve improved upon as it appears less and less). Many instructors might question whether students were not merely writing what they felt the teacher wanted to hear in these blogs. From my own classes, as I encouraged students to decorate their blogs with photos and themes to their liking in order to create their own “personal space” on the web, I felt that students tended to be freer and perhaps a little more honest in writing these blogs than they would normally be in something not as personal (like a written class review). Many of the students in my classes wrote about how they absolutely hated the tedious work of recording each of their errors; at the end of the semester, those same students expressed that doing all that work, however, paid off for them in a big way as they had a visual record of their improvements and were able to both notice and learn from their errors in a way that they had never done before.

Conclusions and recommendations for further research

It would be interesting to see how this strategy could apply to lower-level ESL writers, as that’s where quality proof-reading habits would best be implemented. Perhaps error-recording sheets focusing on only two to three areas at a time and specifically-made for those learners would be appropriate. Having the same instructor in both writing and usage (grammar) classes for the lower levels might also be necessary so that the instructor would know which specific forms have been learned and need to be worked on.

Due to the amount of time this effective error engagement takes, I was not able to incorporate many of the strategies aside from circling errors and holding mid-semester conferences with my ESL freshman composition classes. Ideally, students come into that level with a stronger command for the language, but not always, and many of them could benefit from this type of training in addition to their practice with rhetorical modes and critical thinking. Limitations with
this effective error engagement approach in my pre-freshman composition writing courses only really presented themselves in terms of my large writing class sizes of 18 students; with this size, it was at times difficult to dedicate the amount of time that some students needed, especially for conferences. I could also see limitations presenting themselves with instructors who have fewer contact hours with their writing students.

Finally, based on the reduction of errors I found myself circling on students’ essays, the decrease of specific error patterns on many students’ error recording sheets, and students’ own observations on improvements in both their writing styles, treatment of errors, and writing confidence, I can definitely say that effective error engagement has been a positive addition to my classroom. The added benefit is that I don’t spend nearly the time editing drafts that I once did, but I feel that my students are getting so much more from it in terms of seeing actual results that will better prepare them for their academic writing careers once they enter the U.S. university system.

*Appendix on next page.*
Appendix (Adapted from Fawcett, 2013)—Full-page chart for students.

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Crystal Bock Thiessen graduated with Bachelor's degrees in both Photography and Spanish and received her Master’s in TESL from the University of Central Missouri where she eventually worked with the Intensive English Program for a year and a half. She taught EFL in Sapporo, Japan for three years, and in Lugansk, Ukraine for one as an English Language Fellow. She has worked as an English Language Specialist in Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Georgia, and Russia. Currently, she is an ESL instructor at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, Nebraska, and especially enjoys American Culture, photography and video in the ESL/EFL classroom, and error engagement in language learning as professional interests. Besides teaching, she is a professional photographer specializing in weddings and travel photography and, combined with her love of travel, has photographed and visited 45 countries and 28 U.S. states.