

## ERROR TREATMENT IN THE ENGLISH WRITING CLASS

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### Introduction

In Second Language (L2) Writing, there has been a heated debate as to which error treatment—direct or indirect correction—is more effective for L2 students' long-term editing ability. It seems that L2 writing teachers are more likely to choose indirect correction, be it coded or not, if they think students are able to self-correct their errors. According to Ferris and Roberts (2001), during a 20-minute in-class revision, L2 writers can self-correct approximately 60 percent of their errors given by indirect correction. Also, Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, and McKee (2000) point out that most L2 teachers prefer giving indirect correction for treatable errors (i.e., verb, noun endings, and articles) and direct correction for untreatable ones (i.e., word choice and sentence structure).

However, does indirect correction always outperform direct? How much grammar knowledge is needed for students to manage indirect correction? In what cases do L2 students appreciate direct correction more? For these questions, Ferris (2002) argues that students' English levels should be taken into consideration:

For students at lower proficiency levels, it may not be effective to simply locate an error (with or without a code or explanation) and ask the student to figure out the correct form. Instead, students may benefit from direct correction — the teacher providing the correct forms—and the opportunity to revise or recopy the text with corrections inserted. This gives students needed input for acquisition, the "negative evidence" that some SLA researchers argue is necessary to prevent fossilization, and the opportunity to physically practice editing a correction of their writing (p.57).

Looking back on the first-semester writing class at Keiwa College, I could confirm that my students were exclusively given direct correction. This was simply based on my intuition that they would appreciate direct correction, as

well as that most of them would not be able to handle indirect correction. But, did my intuition lead to the improvement of students' editing ability? Now, in the second semester, are they or some of them ready to utilize some indirect correction? How many of them have the level of grammar knowledge and strategies they need to benefit from indirect correction? What are their preferences toward error treatment? If indirect correction is adopted, how could it be introduced to them? Keeping this in mind, my research questions are as follows:

### **Research Question**

- 1 . For first-year Keiwa students, which error correction is more effective, direct or indirect correction?
- 2 . How many students would be able to manage and benefit from indirect correction?
- 3 . What do students think about error treatment? Which correction do they prefer?

### **Methods**

The grammar errors made by twenty two students in two classes (level I, Unit A) were closely examined. In the first semester, these students were assigned three out-of-class writing tasks, all of which were one-paragraph essays. In each assignment, they were given a sample essay written by the instructor and allowed to utilize some of it if necessary. All of the topics came from three chapters of ACTIVE (Anderson, 2003), the reading textbook. The three topics were:

- 1 . What is one of the most memorable meals in your life?
- 2 . Imagine you are going to study overseas. Which country would you like to go to and study in? Write about your plans (school, length of your trip, where to live, etc.).
- 3 . Looking back on your income and expenses in the first semester, what changes would you make for next semester? Do you need to lower your expenses or increase income? Write about your plan on your student budget.

Since there is a considerable proficiency gap between the two classes, divided by the placement test before the first semester, the data was

compiled for each class: A for the lower class and B for the higher class. All the sixty six first drafts, collected and corrected directly by the instructor, were analyzed in terms of their error rates (error frequencies divided by total words) and their error categories below (Ferris, 2002, p. 92, figure 20).

Verb errors	All errors in verb tense or form, including relevant subject-verb agreement errors
Noun ending errors	Plural or possessive ending incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary; includes relevant subject-verb agreement errors.
Article errors	Article or other determiner incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary
Wrong word	All specific lexical errors in word choice or word form, including preposition and pronoun errors. Spelling errors only included if the (apparent) misspelling resulted in an actual English word.
Sentence structure	Errors in sentence/clause boundaries (run-ons, fragments, comma splices), word order, omitted words or phrases, unnecessary words or phrases; other unidiomatic sentence construction

The first three are categorized as treatable errors, while the last two untreatable errors. In Ferris and Roberts's (2001) study (immigrant, college-level, ESL students were diagnosed as to their self-editing ability), it was revealed that students have most difficulty self-correcting sentence structure errors (47% followed by 53% of word choice errors), suggesting that indirect correction may not be useful for such errors. That is, they argue that the more sentence structure errors are made, the more direct correction is needed.

In addition, a grammar knowledge questionnaire (see Appendix A) was conducted with students enrolled in Unit A, level II in the middle of the second semester. Most of the students were the same, but there were a few new ones. That questionnaire was translated into Japanese for the students' convenience. Also, since most of them seemed not to be familiar with some grammatical terminology, some explanations were provided beforehand.

### **Result (1): Direct or Indirect?**

As seen in table 1, the first-year Keiwa students have many more sentence structure errors (i.e., untreatable errors) than the college-level ESL participants of Ferris and Roberts' study. Such high error rates, 44.4% (A) and 43.7% (B), suggest that the first-year Keiwa students are unlikely to self-correct at least half the errors they make. Also, in the subcategories of

sentence structure errors, "omitted words or phrases" accounts for 25.4% (A) and 18.6% (B) and "unnecessary words or phrases" accounts for 11.6% (A) and 12.9% (B), compared to "fragment" (4.2% and 6%)—a relatively treatable error category.

**Table 1 Percentage of errors**

	Verbs	Nouns	Articles	Word choice	Sentence structure	Total error rate
F (N=67)	29	15.6	7	22.3	26.1	9.6
A(N=10)	12.7	2.3	13.6	27.1	44.4	12.3
B (N=12)	11.1	2.9	10.6	31.7	43.7	8.8

The data of F were adapted from Ferris and Roberts, 2001, p. 171, table 2.

In addition, in terms of word choice, another untreatable error, students also had higher error rates: 27.1% (A) and 31.7% (B). Thus, it seems that the first-year Keiwa students need more direct correction.

### **Result (2): Individual Error Analysis**

As shown in Table 2, there seem to be a certain number of students who can manage indirect correction. However, the students were allowed to utilize some phrases that they did not produce themselves both in the sample essay and in the reading material. In fact, in 62 out of 66 essays, students utilized the topic sentence which appeared in the sample essay. It should be kept in mind that their total error rates—12.3% (A) and 8.8% (B)—do not always reflect the real error rate that would occur if the students produced all the sentences themselves. Therefore, only four students, whose error rates were less than five percent, can be given indirect correction.

**Table 2 Error rate of individual students**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A	8.6	18.9	7.7	12.4	11.6	14.9	16.1	15.9	10.7	6

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
B	7.5	9.1	10.4	12.7	6.9	2	4.3	10.5	7.7	3.2	4.8	8.9

Error rate was calculated by dividing total errors marked by total words. The average number of total words was 98 (A) and 132 (B), respectively.

### **Result (3): Students' Preference**

#### *Type of Grammar Problem Identified*

For questions 1 and 2, Table 3 shows that the students in both classes are aware that they have difficulty in "verb" (43.6% and 45.2%) and "word choice" (50% and 67.9%). Even though, as seen in Table 1, "verb" errors are not as problematic as "word choice" and "sentence structure" errors, it seems reasonable that this category, consisting of "verb tense," "verb form," and "subject-verb agreement," can be targeted first by introducing some grammar mini-lessons in class. In fact, such grammar mini-lessons not only match the students' needs but also seem to help reduce their error rate. The study of Ferris et al. (2000) shows that error rate in verbs (tense and form) is the most likely to be reduced, compared to the four other type error categories. With regard to "word choice," the figures in Table 3—50% (A) and 67.9% (B)—seem to be associated with those in Table 1—27.1% (A) and 31.7% (B), the second problematic area. However, considering that "word choice" is categorized as an "untreatable error," it seems difficult to narrow the focus of systematic grammar lessons. As a result, it may not be possible to expect such grammar lessons to have much effect. Regarding "articles," B class students seem to be considerably frustrated with their correct usage, which clearly matches the widely known contrastive analysis that Japanese English learners tend to have difficulty in using English articles correctly. Regarding sentence structure, despite their significant error rate: 44.4% (A) and 43.7% (B), the students in both classes do not seem to be aware of the extent of the problem in their writing—34.6% (A) and 14.2% (B). This may be because sentence structure issues (e.g., "fragment" or "comma splices") are not usually mentioned until college writing classes. It seems that students should be notified of this situation in order to raise their awareness to their errors.

**Table 3 Grammar knowledge questionnaire responses (N=13, 14)**

Question	Percent (A)	Percent (B)
1/2: Type of grammar problems identified		
Verb	43.6%	45.2%
Noun endings	23.1%	32.1%
Articles	34.6%	64.3%
Word choice	50%	67.9%
Sentence structure	34.6%	14.2%
3: Seriousness of grammar problems in writing		
Serious	41.7%	33.3%
Not serious	8.3%	0%
Other issues more important	16.7%	26.7%
Not sure	33.3%	40%
4: Error feedback preferences		
Don't correct	0%	0%
Correct most serious	7.7%	14.3%
Circle errors	0%	0%
Circle & label error type	30.8%	64.3%
Correct all errors	61.5%	21.4%
5: Individualized error analysis needed		
Yes	92.3%	85.7%

1 & 2 were combined into one. Verb problems are comprised of verb tenses, verb forms, and subject-verb agreement problems. This questionnaire was conducted in the middle of the second semester.

### *Seriousness of Grammar Problems in Writing*

Next, for question 3, a significant number of students—41.7% (A) and 33.3% (B)—are aware that grammar problems can affect their writing adversely. However, it should be equally noted that almost an equivalent number of students—33.3% (A) and 40% (B) are not sure how seriously their grammar errors affect their writing. The students' relatively low grammatical accuracy seems to suggest that it is a necessary step to let them know their real editing skills and emphasize that "student writer's lexical, morphological, and syntactic accuracy is important because a lack of accuracy may both interfere with the comprehensibility of their message (or ideas) and mark them as inadequate users of the language" (Ferris, 2002, p. 9).

In addition, 26.7% of B class students think that criteria other than "accuracy" should be more highly evaluated in their writing. This is mainly

because they are consistently encouraged to put more emphasis on "content" rather than "accuracy" in my class. In fact, the writing rubric of Unit A, level I, states that "content" accounts for 50%, compared to 30% for "accuracy."

### *Error Feedback Preferences*

Before this questionnaire was conducted, it was highly expected that most of the students would prefer all of their grammar errors being corrected by the instructor. However, and surprisingly, as shown in Table 3, this assumption was not proven. Although 61.5% of A class students want all errors to be corrected, only 21.4% of B class students do. It was well beyond my expectation that 64.3% of B class students would prefer their errors being circled and labeled with specific error types. Equally important is that none of the students prefer that the instructor only circles their errors; that is, they think it necessary to know why their grammar errors are circled.

Contrary to such students' preference, Ferris and Roberts (2001) found that there is no significant difference in students' self-editing ability whether indirect correction is made by labeling or not. Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) also conducted a similar study on both kinds of effectiveness and, based on the same finding, they argued that labeling is such a time-consuming method for busy, writing teachers that only circling is more realistic. However, Ferris and Roberts (2001) claim that, regardless of its unverified effectiveness, labeling can "give adequate input to produce the reflection and cognitive engagement that helps students to acquire linguistic structure and reduce errors over time" (as cited in Ferris, 2004, p. 21). Also, they suggest that if the labeling system is clear to students and in-class mini-lessons are introduced to tackle specific type of errors, their errors can be reduced more than by just circling. Considering this suggestion, as well as my students' feedback preferences, it seems possible, at this point, that labeling indirect correction should be taken into consideration, especially for the higher level students. Moreover, returning to the discussion of students' self-editing ability, only treatable errors, such as verb, noun endings, and articles, can be labeled.

### *Individualized Error Analysis*

Table 3 clearly suggests that the first-year Keiwa students need

individualized error analysis (92% and 85.7%). Thus, the following feedback sheet, paired with a handout with an explanation of error types, was prepared. Table 4 is for one of the students in B class. As you can see in the table, his/her error rates (7.5%) are relatively better than the average (8.8%). Also, his/her error percentages are quite distinctive. That is, the percentage of article errors (25%) is more than twice as high as the class average (10.6%). Besides that, the error percentage is much higher than that of word choice errors (21.9%). In addition, the error rate has decreased considerably in three essays.

**Table 4 Individualized Error Analysis**

**Name:**

	1 <sup>st</sup> essay	2 <sup>nd</sup> essay	3 <sup>rd</sup> essay	error rate & percent	B class average
Verb errors	1	0	1	6.3%	11.1%
Noun ending errors	3	0	1	12.5%	2.9%
Article errors	3	5	0	25%	10.6%
Word choice errors	3	3	1	21.9%	31.7%
Sentence structure errors	6	1	4	34.4%	43.7%
Total errors marked	16	9	7	32	350
Total words	157	133	134	424	4787
Error rate	10.2%	6.8%	5.2%	7.5%	8.8%

## Conclusion

Looking back to Table 1, it seems safe to say that direct correction is more suitable for first-year Keiwa students because their error percentages of untreatable errors ("word choice" and "sentence structure") are high. This indicated that their self-editing with indirect correction is not likely to succeed. Also, Table 2 showed that there are only limited numbers of students who are expected to utilize indirect correction. However, according to Table 3, most of the B class students (64.5%) preferred indirect correction with labeled error type while most of the A class students (61.5%) preferred direct correction. Thus, it seems that indirect correction can be introduced only to B class students. Or error treatment can be managed on an individual basis by asking them which error treatment they prefer.

Another issue to consider is what type of indirect correction should be adopted. Contrary to my expectation, students preferred labeled feedback



(Table 3). Although some studies show that, be it labeled or not, there is no difference in the self-editing success rate, it seems that the students' needs should be taken into account. Therefore, given the fact that the students make quite a number of untreatable errors (see Table 1), indirect correction with labeling will be used only for treatable errors—verb, noun endings, and article errors. Direct correction will still be used for untreatable errors—word choice and sentence structure.

As for the limitations of this study, since this study was conducted by the instructor alone, the inter-rater reliability of Table 1 may be questionable. And most importantly, it has yet to be discussed whether error treatment should be comprehensive, identifying all errors, or selective, identifying important errors only. It should be noted that comprehensive correction given in the first semester might not have been possible if students' essays had been much longer. In fact, in the second semester, students are given the five-paragraph essay assignment, in which students usually write approximately 350 words per essay. In this case, it does not seem to be manageable for a L2 teacher to adopt the comprehensive correction method, be it direct or indirect.

Finally, in this study, error treatment in L2 writing has been focused on for the purpose of improving students' self-editing skills. However, it should be kept in mind that error treatment is just one of the issues in L2 writing; that is, other issues, such as "content" or "organization" should not be neglected.

## References

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## Appendix

*Grammar knowledge questionnaire (Adapted from Ferris and Roberts, 2001, p. 181-182)*

- 1 . Has an English teacher ever told you that you have problems with any grammar rules?  
Please circle any specific problems that a teacher has told you about.  
None            Nouns-plural endings    Articles            Verb tenses  
Verb forms    Subject-verb agreement    Word choices    Sentence structure
- 2 . In your own opinion, what problems do you have with using English grammar in your writing? Circle all problems that you think you have.  
None            Nouns-plural endings    Articles            Verb tenses  
Verb forms    Subject-verb agreement    Word choices    Sentence structure  
Don't Know
- 3 . Please circle ONE statement which BEST describes how you feel about your English grammar.
  - (a) My English grammar problems are very serious and really hurt my writing
  - (b) Although I don't know much about English grammar, it's not a serious problem for me.
  - (c) English grammar is not really a serious issue for me. Other writing issues are more important.
  - (d) I'm not really sure whether English grammar is a problem for my writing.
- 4 . In your opinion, what is the best way for me to give feedback about your grammar errors in your writing? Please circle ONE statement only:
  - (a) Don't correct my grammar. Let me try to correct my errors myself.
  - (b) Only correct the most serious errors.
  - (c) Circle my errors, but don't correct them for me.
  - (d) Circle my errors and tell me what type of error it is (verb tense, word choice, etc.).
  - (e) Correct all of my errors for me.
- 5 . Would you like to have your own error analysis?
  - (a) Yes
  - (b) No