The Effectiveness of Teacher Input for Self-Editing among EFL/ESL Writers

The Effectiveness of Teacher Input for Self-Editing among EFL/ESL Writers

Randolph MANN and Koju FUJIEDA

Department of English

(Received on October 15, 1996)

Abstract :   Aiming at students self-editing ability, this paper investigates the effect of three levels of teacher response to writing errors : 1) no cuing ; 2) underlining errors ; 3) underlining and coding errors. Forty-seven subjects were divided into two classes whose abilities in general English were verified with a cloze test to be virtually equal. In a pretest at the beginning of the composition course, both classes were tested for self-editing ability using a "non-cued" passage which again verified virtually equal ability in both groups. Then "underlined" and "coded" passages were given to each class, each passage containing seven errors of the same types. The cuing methods and the passages were exchanged so as to nullify any difference in the passages' level of difficulty. At the end of the course, a post-test was conducted with the same passages. The results of the pretest showed that both classes were on the same level in self-editing with "no cues", that "underlining" was outstandingly advantageous over "no cuing" and that "coding" was significantly more effective than mere "underlining". This tendency was also seen in the post-test, but the difference between "underlining" and "cuing" became much smaller, meaning that the progress rate for functioning with just "underlining" was even greater than for "coding". The relevance of teacher cuing methods, students' progress stages, teaching awareness of distinct error categories and other issues are discussed.

Key Words : writing, self-editing, correction, teacher input

INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE

In these times when the entire world is becoming more efficiency-minded, even writing teachers must be feeling the pinch, especially some ESL/EFL instructors whose students need to make significant strides with their writing within a limited number of classes. And besides being efficient in our method of responding to students' writing errors, don't we teachers also want our painstaking efforts to be effective ? How we react to

our students' writing and how far we go toward offering total correction have been and will continue to be the subjects of considerable debate, because different situations may demand differing approaches (Hendrickson, 1984; Cohen, 1988; Kobayashi, 1922); After all, students are to be found at all stages of skill development and their reasons for writing will be varied. All of that said, the correction process plays a key role in deciding whether or not a student becomes able to self-edit, but so little research has been done to see what can help students apply the rules they have learned in a systematic way (Makino, 1993). As Hendrickson (1984) laments, research on the subject of error correction is scant and more of a standard is needed in regard to who should correct student errors, which should demand more attention, and how they should be corrected. Without progress and results, both teachers and students will quickly become discouraged. Hence, the need for the current project was felt necessary to help us maximize the effects of both teaching and learning in the writing classroom here at Fukui Medical School (FMS) in Japan, to help us know more clearly what approach to correction would nurture EFL writers' ability to self-edit and write independently. This experiment was set up to investigate the effects of three levels of teacher response to writing errors : 1) Little or none (giving only the number of errors, but no indication of their location); 2) Identifying the error location by underlining; 3) and adding codes to the underlined errors to help students understand the type of error involved. Based on experience and other definitive research (Makino, 1993), we hypothesized that underlining would significantly increase a writer's success at error correction. Makino's study involved comparing no cuing with minimal cuing (underlining), and he found that just the added hint of underlining increased students' ability to self-correct significantly. The current study hopes to corroborate his findings and will carry the research one step further by investigating the efficacy of increasing teacher input by one more degree, that is, to add error-type codes to underlining. We hypothesized from the onset that coding, added to underlining, would further increase students' ability to edit effectively. The ongoing research will hopefully give us a clearer understanding of just how significant an advantage the coding may offer, especially when done in the context of a semester writing course which systematically and categorically focuses on predominant error types. How the coding and underlining fit into the teaching context for the whole course is discussed later in relation to research design.

Here at FMS, given the expectations for incoming university-level Japanese medical students who have only one semester to "brush up" their writing skills, many nagging

The Effectiveness of Teacher Input for Self-Editing among EFL/ESL Writers

questions have surfaced: How can young EFL writers become better, more independent self-editors ? Who is really doing the rewriting, the student or the teacher? How much and what kind of teacher input will be effective in (1) stimulating real learning and enhancing writing/editing skill and (2) eliminating the most frustrating, repeated errors? The purpose of this in-progress research is to shed light on these timeless and timely issues.

SUBJECTS/METHOD

All of the incoming freshman class, required to participate in a one-semester writing course, were chosen for this experiment. Of these 95 students, 47 took the class during the fall term of 1995, and the other 48 began the course in the spring term of 1996. Within one semester, the students were divided in half into two classes (A & B), each section receiving instruction at a different time. To date, only the 47 fall-semester students have completed all phases of the sampling, so only the data and results for these students will be presented in this report for discussion.

All students were given a 20-minute cloze test on the first day of class as a relative measure of overall knowledge and proficiency of English. This test was given to establish whether or not the average score for Class A would be on a par with the average for Class B, to determine if the two groups could be considered homogeneous, with no significant difference in ability.

Next, to gather data on how effectively students can recognize various errors and correct them, another phase of testing (a pretest) was also done during the class meeting: Three very short passages (each about 40 words in length) were given [See Appendix A]. These passages were given one at a time and students were allowed a maximum of 7 minutes to complete each one. Each passage contained exactly 7 errors of the same types, that is, problems involving articles (AR), number (NO), verb pattern (VP), verb tense (VT), word choice (WC), word form (WF), and word order (WO).

All students received Passage #1 (which will henceforth be referred to as NP), containing no teacher cuing, that is to say, no designation of error location or error types. T hey were only instructed to find the seven errors and write a correction for each one.

Passage #2 and Passage #3 were presented with increased teacher input. One passage was given with the 7 errors underlined. The other was given with underlining of errors plus a coded notation indicating individual error types. When students got the coded passage, they were also given a separate sheet which offered basic information about

each error code [Appendix B], so they could minimally understand the nature and range of the various error types. In addition, one more important consideration was made in the methodology. To compensate for any difference in the level of difficulty which might exist between Pass. 2 and Pass. 3, Class A received Pass. 2 with underlining plus error coding (CPa), but Class B students received the same Pass. 2 only with underlining (UPb). Just the opposite was done for Pass. 3;Class A received it with underlining only (UPa), while Class B received it as an underlined and coded passage (CPb). The following Table 1 illustrates how this was done.

Table 1 :   EXPERIMENT DESIGN

Text	Wordcount	Errors	Cuing Type	Class	No. of Subjects
Pass. 1	41	(7 types)	No-cuing No-cuing	A B	24 23
Pass. 2	38	(same 7)	Underlined Coded	B A	23 24
Pass. 3	49	(same 7)	Underlined Coded	A B	24 23

In effect, "the class'" ability to function with underlining cues was tested twice, in two separate passages, and its ability to function with coded cues was also tested twice, using the same two passages. Within one method, the scores on the two passages were averaged to get an overall score for the class' ability within one method of cuing. This was done to provide a counter balance so that the passage difficulty factor would be essentially the same for both the underlined and coded tasks. In other words, this had to be to done to make sure that performance was being influenced only by method and that one passage could not be construed as easier or offering any advantage over the other.

Instruction throughout the course was focused on the error code list. It was the basis for teacher input on all student compositions, and the same codes were considered when students did peer-editing. Even the regular scheduled mid-term test for the course was totally designed to test students' knowledge of error codes and their ability to apply them in the process of editing.

At the end of the course, a post test was given, using the exact same materials and

methodology employed in the pretest. Following are the data that will be used as the foundation for implications and conclusions.

RESULTS

In Table 2, the scores for Class A and Class B on the cloze test and the no-cuing passage are compared. Since the differences on both accounts were not significant, and since both groups of students are essentially functioning as one homogenous group, the results of both groups will be combined hereafter in the reporting of this research for simplicity sake and ease of understanding. Especially the scores for the no-cuing passage, of 7.75 (Class A) and 7.73 (Class B), notably reflect how similar the two groups are in their ability to recognize errors and make suitable corrections.

Table 2 :   Comparison of Class A & B Scores

	Cloze Test					Correction of No-cuing Passage				
	Score	Diff.	SD	N	t-test	Score	Diff.	SD	N	t-test
Class A	11.4	0.8	3.45	24	0.74099 (ns)	7.75	0.02	2.12	24	0.0311281 (ns)
Class B	12.2		3.79	23		7.73		2.19	23	

The information presented in Tables 3 and 4 corroborates Makino's findings that underlining offers a significant advantage to students involved in the editing of a written text. These data also support the hypothesis that coding, as added teacher input, will enhance editing ability even more. On the pretest, the difference between no-cuing and underlining is remarkable, and between no cuing and coding, it is yet more outstanding. Even though the difference between underlining and coding is slightly less than that between no cuing and underlining, it is definitely significant. Perhaps the most interesting point of comparison overall is to be found in the differences between underlining effectiveness on the two tests. On the pretest, the gap between no-cuing and underlining was a difference of 2.46, but on the post-test, that gap spread to a remarkable 3.6. Why did students become so much more able to edit correctly only with underlining at the end of the course? We can only assume that their assimilated knowledge of the nature of errors had increased due to the instruction they received as well as through their

Randolph MANN and Koju FUJIEDA

writing and rewriting efforts. Throughout the course, all teacher feedback was done in
the form of underlining plus coding, and error categories were studied on a regular basis
in every class. They were used together at all times, and students themselves had to
memorize the coded categories and use them for peer-editing and test-taking tasks.
Whether the same result would occur just with a more random or general teaching of
grammar is yet to be seen.

Table 3 :　　　　　　　　RESULTS OF THE PRETEST

CLASS	SUBJECTS	CUING TYPE	SCORE (SD)	DIFF.	t-TEST
A & B	47	No-cuing	7.7 (2.15)	2.46	5.095**
A & B	47	Underlined	10.2 (2.47)		
A & B	47	Coded	11.9 (1.77)	1.7	3.794**

　**p＜0.001

Table 4 :　　　　　　　　RESULTS OF THE POST-TEST

CLASS	SUBJECTS	CUING TYPE	SCORE (SD)	DIFF.	t-TEST
A & B	47	No-cuing	8.7 (1.84)	3.6	10.5328**
A & B	47	Underlined	12.3 (1.41)		
A & B	47	Coded	12.8 (1.15)	0.5	2.0942*

　*p＜0.05　　　**p＜0.001

How the learning effect increased the students' ability to edit correctly with only un-
derlining cues is further illustrated in Table 5. The progress rate represents the actual
gain contrasted with the maximum potential gain. Thankfully, as any teacher would
hope for, progress beyond the pretest ability was possible with all three types of
teacher input, but underlining showed the strongest actual gain, considering the amount
of room for improvement.

The Effectiveness of Teacher Input for Self-Editing among EFL/ESL Writers

Table 5 :   PROGRESS BY CUING TYPES

CUING TYPE	PRETEST	POST-TEST	DIFF.	t-TEST	PROGRESS RATE
No-cuing	7.7	8.7	0.96	2.300*	15.3 %
Underlined	10.2	12.3	2.1	5.0078**	55.6 %
Coded	11.9	12.8	0.9	5.7837**	45.8 %

*p＜0.05   **p＜0.001

Table 6 :   PROGRESS BY ERROR TYPES···Cuing Types Combined

ERROR TYPE	PRETEST	POST-TEST	DIFF.	t-TEST	PROGRESS RATE (%)
Article	4.02	4.42	0.4	1.297 (ns)	20.4
Number	5.34	5.65	0.31	1.5651 (ns)	48.3
Verb Pattern	3.40	3.48	0.08	0.2700 (ns)	3.3
Verb Tense	5.27	5.48	0.21	1.1819 (ns)	29.4
Word Choice	3.31	4.57	1.26	4.3566**	46.8
Word Form	4.85	5.14	0.29	1.3809 (ns)	25.9
Word Order	3.74	5.14	1.4	5.2592**	62.2
Total	**29.9**	**33.9**	**4.0**	**5.4708****	**33.0**

**p＜0.001

Pretest and post-test scores in Table 6 should be interpreted as the average ability of the whole class within each error category for all three passages combined. As was hypothesized from the beginning, students made the least headway with article and verb pattern problems. Progress was dramatically low for verb pattern. Such patterns typically involve transitive and intransitive forms, phrasal verbs, and idiomatic collocations. Space does not permit the printing of all data related to the relationship between results seen with specific error types and teacher cuing types, but a few features stood out very conspicuously, so they will be mentioned here. First of all, on the pretest, no-cuing and underlining were very ineffective where WO (word order) was concerned. However, with coded cuing, it had the highest successful correction rate. On the post test, the greatest rate of gain was also seen with WO. The learning effect resulted in students becoming much better at recognizing WO problems, even when no cues were given. With VP (verb pattern) problems, underlining and coding provided little help, and even on the

post test, no progress at all was noted for VP with these two cuing methods. Strangely enough, with no cuing on the post-test, students showed a somewhat improved understanding of VP problems.

DISCUSSION

Some general observations, in and of themselves, may be of interest to writing instructors. For example, looking at the overall average of the whole class for points received for correct pretest responses within each input type, we noted 182 points for no-cuing vs. 241 for underlining vs. 281 for coding. Broadly speaking, increased guidance was an enabling factor for students at entry level of the writing course. Taking into account the total time students spent in writing and editing practice during the whole course, we can compare sum total averages of the pre-and post-tests. Between the 29.9 total average for the pretest (averages for all three passages) and the 33.9 total average obtained for the post-test, there is a 4 point spread. This was a 13% increase in correct responses, considering all cuing methods combined. How much the systematic use of codes for teaching error categories affected this outcome is a matter of conjecture and will require further research.

It would appear that the more advanced students become in their understanding of the nature of errors and the causes of various errors, underlining will be enough teacher input, that is, enough of a stimulus to effect good editing. On the other hand, at least in the beginning stages of writing, there seems to be a consistent advantage in including codes as part of teacher feedback. Doing so offers the beginner more guidance but still forces them to think about the nature of each error and its probable cause, as well as how to approach the task of correction. Psychologically, students at lower levels of language ability may actually require added teacher input (coding as a minimum and perhaps even more detailed comments) in order to feel that they are receiving teacher support as they struggle to improve. Although teachers want students "to stand on their own two feet", sparse teacher input, such as just underlining, can be perceived as lack of teacher interest from the students' perspective. The teacher may have the purest of motives, and still, some students might feel neglected and complain that the teacher is shirking his/her responsibility. The psychological needs of the ESL/EFL learner cannot be so easily measured, but they must definitely not be overlooked. The sensitive instructor will be cautious about "weaning" students too early from the "safety net" that they may feel they need. It might be wise to think of the persevering

writer as one who is lost. To simply say to him/her, "You took a wrong turn again" (just underlining) without offering directions on where to head (codes and comments) may result in increased frustration and resentment. After all, when someone is lost and doesn't have a clue where to turn, they are all too keenly aware of the fact and do not want to be embarrassingly reminded of it ; they crave some guidance on how to get out of the predicament.

Advantages of using the detailed, coded system became apparent even after just a few class sessions : 1) It gave students a tangible check list by which they could try to label and analyze their own errors once they were pointed out by the teacher, and 2) it provided a "common language", so to speak, which all students could use and understand for purposes of peer-editing. 3) In the best case, it provided a kind of check list which some students used to proofread their own first drafts even before handing them in to the teacher. 4) From a teaching standpoint, it provides a method and stimulus for teaching students to do "error hunting". For the sake of practice, another interesting variation on teacher input is to place codes in front of an erroneous sentence, asking students to find where such errors have occurred and make attempts to correct them.

In regard to distinct error types, coding was distinctly appreciated by the students for WO problems, especially in the initial stage of learning. After receiving coded input for WO on various occasions, they gained a working understanding of such problems and were able to avoid and correct such problems later, even when codes were withheld. With WC (word choice), the situation was reversed. Coding offered no advantage over underlining in the matter of WC, but both methods were clearly more effective than no cuing. Consequently, underlining seems sufficient to alert students to WC problems. In EFL/ESL situations, verbs can be expected to be highly problematic and deserve special emphasis and perhaps a greater portion of teaching time. Because distinction between various verb patterns comes slowly, perhaps students should be given increased teacher input and as many good models for practice as possible. Also, coding, at the minimum, appears to be necessary to begin building an awareness of the need for articles, especially for Japanese learners of English.

Of course, styles of teacher input are not limited to the three methods being considered in this report. However, the aim of this research is to see if coding, when used consistently as a means of error identification, can effectively provide a systematic framework to enable writers to become better self-editors. As this research is continued

and more samples of student editing are obtained, it is hoped that the degree of success in imparting such a mental schemata for self-editing will be more clearly defined. Within the design of the continuing research, one more factor will also be explored : Will the teaching method affect the results observed with coded notation? For example, will error recognition in general be enhanced more if the teacher concentrates on the notion of error codes and categories rather than just giving general grammatical explanation as errors arise? How much the teaching effect can contribute to the effectiveness of the teacher input method should be investigated, and the insights gleaned thus far seem to indicate that such a study will prove worthwhile.

References

Cohen, A. D. (1988). "The Processing of Feedback on Student Papers." In A. L. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Research on learner strategies*. Oxford : Pergamon Press.

Hendrickson, J. M. (1984). "The Treatment of Error in Written Work." In S. McKay (Ed.), *Composing in a second language* (pp. 145-159). Rowley, MA : Newbury House.

Kobayashi, Toshihiko (1992). "Native and Nonnative Reactions to ESL Compositions." *TESOL Quarterly,* 26-1.

Makino, Taka-Yoshi (1993). "Learner Self-correction in EFL Written Compositions." *ELT Journal,* 47-4.

Appendix A

Passage 1 :   (*NP*) NO-CUING PASSAGE

> DIRECTIONS : There are seven errors in the sentences below.
>
>   Find, *underline*, are *correct* them.
>
>
> Few minutes later, he falled asleep because it was a nice, warm day.
> During he sleeps, the playful monkey came down the tree. They
> each took a hat and put on it. Then, they wore just like the old man
> did.

Passage 2 :   (*UPb*) UNDERLINED PASS. 2

> DIRECTIONS : Write a correction for each underlined error.
>
>
> When he got angry and raised his fist, the monkeys raised, too.
>
> Many time he said, "Return quickly my hats," but the monkeys on
>
> the tree only mimic him. He was confusing and began to get ___
>
> headache.

(*CPa*) CODED PASS. 2

> DIRECTIONS : Consult your error-code guide and try to write a
>
>   suitable correction for each error.
>
>
> When he got angry and raised his fist, the monkeys raised, too.
>   VP
> Many time he said, "Return quickly my hats," but the monkeys on
>   NO   WO   WC
> the tree only mimic him. He was confusing and began to get ___
>   VT   WF   AR
> headache.

Passage 3 : *(CPb)* **CODED PASS. 3**

DIRECTIONS : Consult your error code guide and try to write a

suitable correction for each error.

Finally, one hour after, he got suddenly a good idea and burst out
     WC   WO

laughing. He put his hat on again and bowed very deep, so the
               WF

monkeys bowed ___ same way, too. Then, the hats drop off the
     AR   VT

monkeys' head. He picked up his precious hats and said them
    NO   VP

good-bye.

(UPa) **UNDERLINED PASS. 3**

DIRECTIONS : Write a correction for each underlined error.

Finally, one hour after, he got suddenly a good idea and burst out

laughing. He put his hat on again and bowed very deep, so the

monkeys bowed ___ same way, too. Then, the hats drop off the

monkeys' head. He picked up his precious hats and said them

good-bye.

Error Type
－誤りの型－

　これは日本人学生がよくおかす英語表現の誤りを分類したものである。それは必ずしも文法上の品詞による分類ではなく，訂正するときの便を考えて経験的に分類したものである。もし誤りの型の記号（＝訂正記号）が示されれば，学生諸君はそれだけで自分の誤りを直せる場合が相当にある。また，時々このError Typeを参照することにより，英文表現のときに気をつけなければならないチェックポイントとしても役立つであろう。

1　AD：Adverb（強意等の副詞が必要：IWの一種）

2　AG：Agreement（主語－動詞の一致／呼応に問題がある）

3　AR：Article（冠詞に問題がある－変える／補う／削除する）

4　CH：Choppiness（表現がこま切れ－より長い1文にまとめる）

5　FR：Fragmentary Sentence（断片文：完全な文になっていない）

6　IL：Illogicality（不合理文：筋が通らない／否定語などの脱落がある）

7　IW：Insufficient Wording（舌足らず表現：ある言葉・概念が欠けている）

8　ME：Mechanical Error（スペリングや句読点など書記法に問題がある）

9　NE：Negation（否定のしかたに問題がある）

10　NO：Number（単数・複数の問題）

11　PE：Poor Expression（表現が拙劣である－よりよい表現に変える）

12　QP：Question Pattern（疑問文の文型に問題がある）

13　RD：Redundancy（表現が冗長である－削除または他の簡潔な表現に変える）

14　RF：Reference（代名詞が何を指しているのか不明・曖昧である）

15　RO：Run-on Sentence（無終止文：2つの文，節がくっつき，正しい接続をしていない）

16　TR：Transition（わたり語句が欠けているか，不十分である：IWの一種）

17　VB：Verbal（不定詞・分詞・動名詞の用法に問題がある）

18　VO：Voice（能動態／受動態の使い分け，あるいはその形態に問題がある）

19　VP：Verb Pattern（動詞の文型に問題がある）

20　VT：Verb Tense（時制〈現在・過去・未来〉や相〈完了・進行〉の誤り）

21　WC：Word Choice（意味・ニュアンスなどの点で語の選択を誤っている）

22　WF：Word Form（語の活用，比較変化，品詞による語形などに問題がある）

23　WO：Word Order（語・語句の順序の誤り）