DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 345 CS 206 806

AUTHOR Krug, Clara
TITLE An Error-Analysis Design for Improving the Writing Skills of College-Level Foreign Language Students.
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the National Endowment for the Humanities/Beaver College Summer Institute for Writing in the Humanities (Glenside, PA, July 26-31, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Computer Assisted Testing; English; *Error Analysis (Language); Error Patterns; *French; Higher Education; *Second Language Instruction; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Writing across the Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that teaching basic writing involves first understanding what tends to go wrong when students write, a computer assisted system of error prediction and analysis was designed to improve college students' writing skills in both English and French. Students were to complete a sequenced series of writing assignments first in English, then in French. To determine the relationship between English and French errors, error data would be collected, classified, recorded on code sheets, and interpreted through a specially designed computer program. Findings from the error analysis would then be used to review syntactic and grammatical problem areas with a second class prior to making their writing assignments, with the hope that such errors would decrease for this group of students. If effective, a similar error analysis design could be used in two other areas of study: English as a second language and business. (AEA)

An Error-Analysis Design for Improving the Writing Skills of College-Level Foreign Language Students

presented

at

Writing in the Humanities-

An Evolving Curriculum for the 80's

July 28, 1981

by

Clara Krug.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Comment dire merci à tous les gens qui ont tant contribué à mon développement professionnel et personnel? Eh bien, je vais faire un effort.

I would like to thank Warren Jones, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, and Charles Austin, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, for the support which they have given to the members of the Georgia Southern College team. Without their assistance, I would not have been able to participate in this institute.

The institute staff has been amusing, appreciative, refreshing, challenging, and supportive--all of these at just the right moments and in just the right measure. In discussions with Bill Barker and Ned Wolff, two other members of the Beaver College faculty, I learned information which led me to devise the research format which I describe in this paper. Without this guidance of all of these individuals, my project would not be as refined as it appears here.

All of the other institute participants have contributed to the knowledge and insight that I have gained during these five weeks. Equally important, they have made me feel a part of a community of scholars, colleagues, and friends. I will never forget this summer with them, nor will I be able to duplicate it. A special thank you is in order for Tom Dasher, John Dick, and Martha Mc Ilvaine, who read and commented upon this paper. They helped me improve it and grow to be proud of it.

How is the world of foreign languages related to the teaching of writing? Aren't just a few of us going to use French only to find a hotel and a few restaurants on a trip to Paris? Why should the thirty-two participants who do not teach (or perhaps even fluently speak) a foreign language, the institute staff, a variety of administrators who barely know us, and invited guests be interested in the papers in this session? I hope that, through this session, the three of us will remove any doubt which may exist about the place of foreign languages in writing across the curriculum.

During five years as a graduate teaching assistant and eight years as a full-time faculty member, I have taught French courses at all undergraduate levels. During these years, beginning with the first quarter of elementary French, my classes have included a writing component. On the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels, in implementing the writing component, I have experienced difficulty in devising successful strategies for teaching students to organize their thoughts and to use correct grammar and syntax in the target language. It is my goal to ascertain the nature and causes of specific syntactic and grammatical difficulties which students experience when writing in the target language and to devise strategies to improve their writing.

As a member of the French faculty, I have never concentrated on assigning or reading original student compositions written in English. Therefore, I am somewhat unacquainted with the patterns of error in my students' native language which contribute to their difficulty in writing in the foreign language. I am also relatively unaware of the correct patterns in their native language which interfere with the development of writing skills when the foreign language requires a different pattern. Mina Shaughnessy's studies have

shown that "to understand what tends to go wrong when our students write and to acquire the habit about reasoning what goes wrong are preliminary steps to deciding how to teach basic writing."[1] Like Shaughnessy, I believe that it is imperative for me to identify incorrect writing patterns in the native and target languages and to refer to these errors in devising strategies to promote improvement in various aspects of the writing process in the target language.

In Fall Quarter, 1981, I will teach French 252, the second and final course in intermediate French. Ten to fifteen students usually enroll. Today, I do not intend to provide details about texts or the incorporation of reading into the writing process in this course. Nor will I mention the types of exercises which I will design to assist students in correcting errors which appear in the various drafts of their papers. I will limit myself to a presentation of the procedure which I will follow in collecting and analyzing these syntactic and grammatical errors. By a "syntactic" error, I mean what Mina Shaughnessy refers to as errors created " [when] a writer breaks the rules of word order that govern the English sentence . . . [and] disturbs the reader at a deep level, forcing him to re-cast mentally the deviant sentence before he can proceed to the next one."[2] As a result of this type of error, the reader may not be able to understand an entire paragraph. Although important, what I am referring to as "grammatical" errors are less serious, because they do not greatly impair comprehension of a sentence; in effect, they do not slow down the reader. One example of a grammatical error is an inappropriate word form: the verb produce, rather than the noun product.

Previously, when teaching this course, I required that students write three compositions in French during the ten-week term. The compositions constituted ten per cent of their final grade. This Fall, I will alter the structure of the course. Students will complete a diagnostic essay and six writing

assignments; not all of the assignments will be multi-paragraph compositions:

1. What is happening in my life today
2. What happened in my life yesterday
3. Summarize a newspaper article.
4. Explain a procedure to a foreign student who is visiting America for the first time.
5. Compare the French university system to the American university system.
6. . . .

You will notice that the assignments occur in a specific sequence. The student begins with personal narrative and moves toward commentary on the outside world in a continuous decentering process; he begins with a single paragraph and moves toward an indeterminate number of paragraphs which must be organized both cohesively and coherently; he moves from material based on personal experience to material based on reading content; he moves from relatively simple syntactic and grammatical formations to ones of greater complexity. The entire sequence requires movement from the simple to the complex. Each student will complete two different versions of each writing assignment in the sequence. The first version will be in English; the second will be in French.

For each assignment in the sequence, a student will complete the English version first. Several days later, he will complete the French version. Consider the first writing assignment: What is happening in my life today. On Monday of the first full week of classes, in class, each student will spend fifteen minutes writing one paragraph of a maximum of two pages in length on that topic. I will xerox several copies of this first draft for use in the collection of data, read the draft, and return it to the student the following day. Attached will be a series of reader's comments designed to aid the student in revising the first draft. The student will complete the revision outside class and submit both drafts to me on Wednesday. On Wednesday, in class, the student will spend twenty-five minutes writing on the topic, "Ce qui se passe dans ma vie aujourd'hui" (What is happening in my life today). I will also xerox

several copies of this first draft, read it, and return it the following day with a series of reader's comments. The student will revise his draft outside class and submit the final draft to me on Friday. As the quarter progresses, more time will be allowed for the completion of certain writing tasks. I will xerox the initial and final drafts in each language. However, the student will never have access to the corrected final English version of a particular paper until he has completed the final copy of the French version.

For each writing assignment, I have spaced the English and French versions for two reasons. The first is to guarantee that the student not be required to move from a writing process in an English frame of reference to one in a French frame within one class session. The student should already be in a partially French frame of reference when he writes in French--either at the end of a class session or at home. This renders the situation in which the student writes the French version as free from stress as possible. A second result of spearating writing versions by a period of days--and of somewhat varying the title without varying the topic, is to render it impossible for the student to directly translate his essay into French. Although certain variables will be involved with each writing assignment, this practice of spacing the English and French versions will remain constant.

In order to determine the relationship between English and French errors, it will be necessary to collect data on errors made by students in both languages. Before collecting data, I will complete a code sheet on which I indicate the errors which I expect each writing assignment to generate. For example, I anticipate the following errors on the first assignment:

1. Anticipated errors in English
   a. Time relationships: use of the past tense; use of the infinitive instead of the conjugated verb; improper use of modal auxiliaries (must, can, etc.)
   b. Co-ordinate structures: lack of parallel structure in lists

c. Inappropriate word forms: use of a noun form (product) instead of a verb form (produce)

2. Anticipated errors in French
   a. Time relationships: use of the past tense; improper formation of the present tense; improper formation of the immediate future tense; improper use of modal auxiliaries
   b. Co-ordinate structure: lack of parallel structure in lists
   c. Subordinate structure: that (que) used incorrectly; another word used for that (que)
   d. Inappropriate word forms: use of a noun form (le travail) instead of a verb form (travailler)

On individual code sheets, for each student, I will record the errors made on drafts of both the English and French versions.

There is always a danger that a faculty member may be influenced by factors outside the text when evaluating written work. I have devised three procedures which should minimize the possibility of bias and thus assure the reliability of my samples. In order to guarantee that I will not indentify a student when collecting data, I will require that students print their drafts. For the same reason, I will establish a coding system. Before reading the students' drafts of the first assignment, I will remove their names from their papers and assign a code number to each student. I will follow the same procedure when preparing to collect data from subsequent assignments. As a result, I hope that the identity of the writer of a particular paper will not influence my evaluation of the errors that I find. To guarantee that I am identifying and classifying errors uniformly, I will correct a few duplicate copies of each assignment. If I do not locate errors consistently, I will need to alter my method of collection. In order to guarantee that I have precisely described each error which I expect to find, I will ask a colleague on the French faculty to read some rough drafts of each assignment. If there is a discrepancy in our identification and classification of errors, I will describe more precisely the errors which will possibly emerge on that assignment. As a result of these

three precautionary measures, I hope to collect reliable data on all six writing assignments.

To interpret the data, I will use a computer program designed by a colleague in the School of Business. It will indicate the percentages of error caused by three specific categories of problems:

1. the transfer of incorrect patterns from English to French when grammatical or syntactic patterns in the two languages are similar.

2. the inability to transfer correct patterns from English to French when patterns in the two languages are similar.

3. the interference caused by the transfer of a pattern from English to French when patterns in the two languages are dissimilar.

In order to achieve this, it will be necessary that the program include three variables:

1. what students know in English and what they do not know in English.

2. errors made in French when English/French patterns are similar and errors made in French when English/French patterns are different.

3. the type of writing assignment.

When the data have been collected and interpreted according to the procedures and the computer program indicated, the first stage of my project--research with a control group--will be complete.

I will continue my project by using the results of my research to construct teaching strategies for another French 252 class. This experimental group will meet during Spring Quarter, 1982. When I prepare the experimental class for each writing assignment, the results of the error-analysis study of the control group will determine the manner in which I proceed. During the ten-week session, each student will prepare the same six writing assignments that the control group prepared during Fall Quarter. However, when teaching the

experimental group, before students begin to write a particular assignment, I will consult my findings to determine which errors occurred most frequently in the first drafts prepared by the control group. Prior to assigning the same writing task to the experimental group, I will review the correct syntactic and grammatical patterns in class. This procedure will allow the student to ascertain his level of comprehension of certain forms and structures before he attempts to incorporate them in paragraphs in either English or in French. I will proceed in the same manner for all written assignments.

Error analysis will continue with the experimental group as it began with the control group. First, each student will prepare at least one draft and a final draft of an assignment in English. Without referring to the English drafts, he will then perform the same task in French. Once again, following the procedure that I initiated with the control group, I will collect data on syntactic and grammatical errors made in both languages on all assignments. When I have completed the survey of errors, using the same computer program, I will analyze them to determine the frequency of errors caused by the same three problem areas studied with the control group. By comparing percentages of error in the control and experimental groups, I intend to determine whether students make the same types of errors with the same frequency both in English and in French. Of course, I hope that the preliminary oral/aural and written preparation in those areas which constituted problems for the control group will reduce the frequency of their occurrence in the writing assignments completed by the experimental group.

William Barker, a member of the departments of Education and Mathematics, Statistics, and Computer Science at Beaver College, has suggested that, in future years, I continue my research and increase the number of variables on the computer program to include other factors which may influence the writing pro-

cess. One variable currently being considered in research in other fields is the individual student's measure of self concept. Another is his individual cognitive processing level, as described by Piaget. Of course, for this research, I will need to enlist the assistance of developmental psychologists.

My error analysis of English and French writing assignments has numerous applications in teaching at Georgia Southern College--amd, indeed, at all institutions of higher education. My immediate concern is its application in foreign languages, initially in the teaching of my own French 252 classes. If the strategies suggested by my research prove successful in reducing errors of students on this level, I will implement variations of them in all of my elementary and intermediate classes during the 1982/83 academic year. During the Spring Quarter of 1983, I will assist my colleagues on the French staff in implementing them in all elementary and intermediate classes. Such implementation should be facilitated by the fact that we teach from common textbooks on these levels. Thus, we could make common writing assignments. During the 1983/84 academic year, I hope to assist my colleagues on the German and Spanish staffs in implementing the same method of teaching writing.

This method might also prove beneficial in two other areas of study which are becoming increasingly important on college campuses across the country: English as a Second Language and Business. In English as a Second Language, implementation of this error-analysis design would, of course, involve reversing the procedure in a sense by requiring that one begin with error analyses of writing in a variety of native languages and compare and contrast these analyses with error analyses of writing in a single target language--English. With continued predictions of declining college enrollments and the resultant courting of foreign students, it is incumbent upon teachers of English as a Second Language to provide a significant amount of individualized instruction in

writing. An error-analysis design based upon patterns in the native language would provide a sound component of such instruction. This design could also contribute to the development of writing techniques among students of business. At many institutions, the School of Business generates a greater number of credit hours than any other academic unit. Students in programs of business study need to learn a foreign language. Even if they are not specializing in international business, there is a significant possibility that they will be employed by a company with subsidiaries or a home office in a foreign country. The Volkswagen plant in New Stanton, Pennsylvania is only one example of such a multinational company. In the state of South Carolina alone, at least twenty-five French and German businesses have established plants or offices. Perhaps the most famous is Michelin Tires. For an employee of a multinational company, reading, and writing at least one foreign language may be an integral part of each workday.

As participants in this institute, if, when we arrived, we were not convinced of the necessity of improving writing in all disciplines and of our own ability to assist in accomplishing this goal, we became convinced sometime before this colloquium began. As Kenneth Bruffee states in the February 27, 1978 edition of The Chronicle of Higher Education, "the primary goal of our profession is to make genuine differences in the lives of fellow human beings, by teaching them to know and use the minds they have been endowed with."[3] I propose this error-analysis design as a tool which foreign language teachers may employ to enhance a student's ability to think and write, both in English and in the target language.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 284.

[2]Ibid., p. 90.

[3]Kenneth A. Bruffee, "Point of View," The Chronicle of Higher Education (February, 27, 1978), p. 40.