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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the use of specific error
correction and writing instruction techniques in a composition course
designed for foreign graduate students. Weekly in-class student
essays on assigned topics were returned to them ungraded but
containing explanations of grammar points, confusing vocabulary,
content, and organization. A conscious effort was made to find
praiseworthy elements in every essay. Student discussion was
encouraged. In addition, classroom instructional units taught a
variety of editing techniques. This comprehensive response strategy
was intended to develop students' ability to self-edit. Case data
were collected on one Chinese doctoral student, selected because of
his motivation, receptiveness to the approach, high first-language
literacy level, and metalinguistic awareness that facilitated
analysis and discussion of his writing. Data were gathered from
in-class essays, taped conferences, formal writing samples, taped
formal presentation, and classroom observations. Analysis found that
despite focused feedback and assisted production, the student's
writing did not improve, and in some respects deteriorated. While his
writing and risk-taking increased, with improvement in content,
organization, logical transitions, vocabulary, and mechanics, it was
marked throughout the study by non-native constructions, suggesting a
need for some cognitive restructuring to address the speech-writing
connection. Lessons learned and implications for classroom technique
are explored. Contains eight references. (MSE)

ED 388 109

# RESPONDING TO THE ADULT ESL WRITER:
## A TEACHER-AS-RESEARCHER CASE STUDY

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## Abstract

Although research in both L1 and L2 writing has found little quantitative evidence to suggest that error correction results in improved writing, this study supports the view that error correction in a context of assisted production has qualitative benefits for both student and teacher. The research methodology, a teacher-as-researcher ethnographic case study, provides both quantitative and qualitative data on the writing skills of a graduate-level ESL student. The study demonstrates why advanced-level errors are difficult to identify and address unless both student and teacher act as collaborator-evaluator. Finally, the study questions the effectiveness of teaching written English as a separate code (L3) when the adult student has achieved a level of speaking fluency which incorporates fossilized forms.

## Introduction

This teacher-as-researcher ethnographic case study was conducted in a graduate-level ESL composition class at the University of Florida in 1994. ENS 4449 is an S/U (pass/fail) course designed for international graduate students whose GRE verbal scores are below 320 or whose TOEFL scores are below 550. The course introduces students to academic research and provides instruction in writing a thesis or dissertation. Although the class is taught through a process approach in which emphasis is placed on organization and content, my classes are also given mini-units of context-embedded grammar. For example, verb tenses are reviewed in the context of writing specific sections of the research proposal and relative clauses are incorporated into the unit on writing abstracts and summaries as a strategy for

condensing text. This study was motivated by my observation that the progress students made in their writing during the semester in the areas of content and organization was overshadowed by persistent semantic and syntactic errors. I decided to try a different pedagogical approach which would test the effectiveness of a more comprehensive response strategy. I was specifically interested in finding a way to develop the student's ability to engage in self-editing, a necessity for students who take only one writing class. The hypothesis on which the study is predicated is that the writing skills of adult NNS students will improve if comprehensive response is used in a context of assisted production that focuses on joint (student-teacher) analysis supported by in-depth explanation.

**Methodology**

1.      Pedagogical Approach.

The data for this study was drawn from weekly in-class essays written on assigned topics. While the process approach was used for the students' major projects, comprehensive response was provided on these impromptu essays; that is, in addition to marking errors of syntax and semantics, I did not, as is sometimes suggested (e.g., Hughey et al. 1983; Kroll 199'; Semke 1984) select only a few errors on which to focus or overlook article deletions, spelling, and punctuation errors. The essays were not graded but were returned with notes or comments explaining various points of grammar or confusing vocabulary items, as well as remarks on content and organization. I made a conscientious effort to find something in every essay that I could praise, and, in fact, this turned out not to be difficult. I repeatedly stressed throughout

the semester that I considered these essays to be the equivalent of a "first draft" since 50 minutes does not allow time for revision, and that their main purpose was to serve as a source of data for both the instructor and the student. That is, the essays gave the student information about his or her problems in writing academic English while they gave the instructor information about how to provide individualized guidance. In other words, I attempted to the best of my ability to present the corrections as positive rather than punitive. These essays then served as the focus of obligatory conferences until the students were sufficiently far along in their research papers. The errors were analyzed and discussed in the conferences by both student and teacher. The student was encouraged to ask questions, to explain the choice of a particular form and its meaning, and, especially important, to disagree if a suggested correction altered the intended meaning. In order to develop self-editing skills, the students were presented with classroom units on editing techniques, including peer and group response, and were prompted to use editing strategies in analyzing their own sentences in the conferences.

2.     Selection of Subject

While this pedagogical approach was uniformly applied to all students, the ethnographic case study is based on triangulated data collected on one student, who was not aware of the study. The subject was a Chinese doctoral student in his late 20's, who had begun learning English in high school in Taiwan. I selected Mr. K. for the study on the basis of several characteristics: 1) motivation to improve his writing skills for his dissertation in engineering; 2) receptiveness to the comprehensive

response/conferencing approach I had introduced; 3) an apparent high degree of literacy in his own language; and 4) a degree of metalinguistic awareness that facilitated analysis and discussion of his writing. My purpose in selecting a student with these characteristics rather than using random selection was to control the problematic variables of motivation, aptitude, intelligence, and native-language literacy. In other words, Mr. K. had characteristics which would predict improvement if the research hypothesis were correct, thereby suggesting that such a pedagogical approach might succeed with other students. On the other hand, if, despite these favorable characteristics, Mr. K.'s writing did not improve using this approach, it would be unlikely that these variables were the cause.

3. Data Collection

I observed Mr. K. over a 13-week period during which I collected the following triangulated data:

(1) Eight in-class essays consisting of informal, unplanned and unedited writing. (Copies of essays #1 and #7 are included at the end of this article.)

(2) Two taped conferences consisting of informal, unmonitored speech, as well as documentation of the conference approach.

(3) Four formal, planned, edited and revised writing samples consisting of draft and finished versions of his research project.

(4) One taped formal presentation representing planned and monitored speech.

(5) Completed observation forms for each in-class essay, including a T-unit analysis (sample included).

4.    Response Procedures

Two marking procedures were used in the study.   First, a copy was made of

each in-class essay and the original was marked for errors and returned to the student.

The student's corrected (original) copy was then discussed in the conferences.

Second, the copy of the essay was marked using a systematic procedure identifying

and coding six categories of error  based on Carlisle and McKenna (1991).  The

following categories and definitions were used in the study:

Code: ①    <u>Function Words</u> - Deletion or misuse of prepositions, determiners, articles, particles, conjunctions, and the infinitive marker in an obligatory context.

Code: ②    <u>Grammatical Morphemes</u> - Deletion or misuse of inflectional morphemes, such as plural, possessive, or tense markers in an obligatory context. Also included in this category (but not in Carlisle and McKenna) was improper tense selection.

Code: ③    <u>Agreement</u> - Deletion or misuse of agreement; for example, between subject and verb; between pronoun and antecedent; or between demonstrative and head noun.

Code: ④    <u>Diction</u> - A fairly inclusive category encompassing invented words, words with incorrect semantic collocation, and choice of incorrect class (e.g., noun for adjective).

Code: ⑤    <u>Syntax</u> - Errors in word order, negation, parallelism, modification, as well as deletion of subject or verb or other misuse of ellipsis.

Code: ⑥    <u>Semantics</u> - Illogical or nonsensical statements (i.e., a semantic discordance between constituents in a clause or sentence); vague content contributing to difficulty of interpretation despite surrounding context.

The original essay returned to the student contained comprehensive response with

comments and explanation; only the copies of the essays used for data collection

contained the categorized and coded errors. The coded copies were not given to or discussed with the student. The coded errors were then tabulated on observation forms along with observational comments drawn from the essay and the conference discussions. Conclusions from the study are drawn from both this quantitative data, as well as qualitative data in the form of "thick description" drawn from written observations.

5.     The Researcher as Participant-Observer

It is important to clarify that in this study the ethnographer/researcher plays an expanded role. Whereas the usual researcher as participant-observer role aims at minimizing to the extent possible any intervention in the outcome of the study, the role of researcher in this study overlaps with the role of classroom teacher. My goal as teacher/evaluator/collaborator was to help Mr. K. improve his writing skills, and in this capacity I provided focused feedback and assisted production. My goal as researcher/participant/observer was to neutrally observe and evaluate whether the pedagogical approach resulted in an improvement in the quality of Mr. K.'s writing.

**Results**

The quantitative results of the study show that, despite focused feedback and assisted production, Mr. K.'s writing did not improve. In fact, from the standpoint of numbers of errors, his writing appears worse at the end of the study than at the beginning. The following table summarizes the quantitative results of the coded error data and T-unit analyses of the essays.

| Essay | Function Words | Grammatical Morphemes | Agreement | Diction | Syntax | Semantics | Total T-Units | Total Words | Words per T-Unit |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 115 | 19 |
| 2 | 9 | 5 | 7 | 12 | 7 | 5 | 15 | 225 | 15 |
| 3 | 10 | 6 | 2 | 20 | 5 | 8 | 17 | 222 | 13 |
| 4 | 12 | 3 | 6 | 20 | 8 | 7 | 19 | 302 | 16 |
| 5 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 13 | 8 | 6 | 13 | 242 | 19 |
| 6 | 11 | 9 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 1 | 22 | 288 | 13 |
| 7 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 13 | 15 | 7 | 22 | 270 | 12 |
| 8 | 8 | 12 | 7 | 19 | 7 | 4 | 27 | 357 | 13 |

Although these results are no doubt discouraging for those who advocate more rigorous error correction (or encouraging for those who do not), the value in this kind of study is that qualitative data is available to serve as an interpretative frame for the quantitative findings. The qualitative data provide some insight for understanding why Mr. K.'s writing failed to improve when measured quantitatively.

## Discussion

A glance at the table shows that, contrary to the belief that error correction stifles student writing, the length of Mr. K.'s 50-minute essays more than doubled over the semester. As a result, his writing involved more risk-taking as he addressed the assigned topics in increasing depth with a concomitant and predictable increase in the number of errors. Using holistic grading, Mr. K.'s writing shows progressive improvement over the semester in terms of content, organization, logical transitions, vocabulary, and mechanics. Nevertheless, his writing remained marked throughout the study by non-native speaker constructions such as the following: "So many topics

exist, how such beautiful and interesting area, neural network implement is my choice on the research of study."

The conferences provided valuable observational data about Mr. K.'s learning strategies. In focusing on such problematic sentences, Mr. K. would explain the intended meaning after which I would explain why the particular structures did not convey his desired meaning to an English-speaking reader. We would then jointly explore alternative means of achieving the desired end. Sometimes the source of the problem could be pinpointed to a particular construction in Chinese; in other cases, the source of the construction was much more complicated. This type of focusing and analysis was invaluable because both of us were often able to disentangle a conflation of forms underlying a surface error which defied simple correction. For example, Mr. K.'s use of "after a couples years later" is not only a conflation of "after a couple of years" and "a couple of years later," but also appears on the surface to involve a misplaced plural morpheme, which would classify it as an agreement error. Discussion revealed, however, that based on the word "of" Mr. K. had interpreted the construction as possessive entailing the alternative use of the genitive "-'s" (e.g., "friend of John" vs. "John's friend"). He had then omitted the obligatory apostrophe which separates the genitive morpheme from the plural. This example illustrates why surface error correction alone is ineffective and possibly futile unless accompanied by supporting explanation which address the learner's strategy in selecting the ill-formed construction Not only is the underlying source often more complex than the surface error suggests, but there is the danger that the teacher may misinterpret the error and

suggest a correction that completely alters the intended meaning.

The observational data collected on the conferences suggested that Mr. K.'s key learning strategy was analogy. Constructions such as "the cheated data" (by analogy with "cooked data"), "the existed plan" (by analogy with the "adopted plan") and "laughed by them" (by analogy with "seen/heard/believed by them") illustrate that simply supplying the correct form is insufficient because it does not provide a clue to the NNS as to what the problem really entails, in this case, a misunderstanding of thematic relations and the role of transitivity. These notions certainly take time to explain and take even more time for the student to process and internalize; however, without an explanation that words are not interchangeable building blocks but carry their own requirements, it is unrealistic to expect any surface error correction to effect improved results even in the long term.

Analysis of Mr. K.'s planned and unplanned speech suggests that it may be necessary to reassess the relationship between speech and writing in the context of teaching L2 writing to adults. The notion that L2 writing may be presented as another dialect (Krashen 1978) seems unrealistic when dealing with adult students. In this case, Mr. K. had achieved a relatively high degree of communicative competence which allowed him to converse fluently and effectively, even when discussing technical engineering topics. However, close examination of his transcribed speech revealed that he wrote exactly as he spoke. That is, the same problematic forms which plagued his writing were found to be characteristic of his speech. While this is not unusual even for native speakers, it is especially problematic when we are dealing with fossilized

forms in adult NNS speech. Not only are these difficult to overcome in speech, but it may be unrealistic to expect the adult NNS to be able to overcome these same forms in writing when they have become a comfortable communication strategy.

## Conclusions

Framing the quantitative data within the context of the qualitative data provides some insight for the writing instructor as to (1) the kinds of problems faced by the advanced-level, adult ESL writer and (2) how much improvement teachers can realistically expect in one semester with respect to error correction and assisted production. The results of this study indicate that short-term quantitative data alone is unlikely to show measurable improvement in the number of syntactic and semantic errors. Nevertheless, this fact alone is not sufficient evidence for concluding that the time spent correcting errors is misguided (cf., Semke 1984; Robb, Ross and Shortreed 1986). It can be argued that this study shows that demonstrable quantitative improvement is an unrealistic expectation within one semester. The most likely reason is that the semester is an artificial time frame in which to assume mastery of new cognitive skills. It is important to keep in mind when assessing the effectiveness of error correction, that it involves two different operations on the part of the teacher and student. That is, the marking of errors by the teacher and the accompanying explanation of how to correct them is a linguistic operation; however, what the student is expected to do with the information involves nothing less than cognitive restructuring, a neurological operation that is at best poorly understood (McLaughlin 1990). We still don't fully understand the cognitive processes involved in learning a second language,

but it seems reasonable to expect that the complex nature of advanced-level English writing will take considerable time to integrate and internalize. As a result, the failure of quantitative studies to demonstrate the value of error correction seems almost predictable. It would be misguided, however, to base a teaching strategy which minimizes error correction upon such quantitative data, for to do so is to deny the student the opportunity to start on the long learning curve in the first place.

Examination of the combined quantitative and qualitative data suggests the following conclusions concerning the value of error correction in a context of assisted production.

1.      When error correction is a collaborative process involving student and teacher, it can benefit both in qualitative ways. Only when the student is encouraged to analyze how his or her writing constructs meaning and is guided towards an understanding of how and why particular strategies fail can long-term progress be expected. Only when the teacher presents explanations that do not conflict with the student's learning strategies can the student be expected to incorporate the correction through a cognitive restructuring process. Anything less results in a surface error correction that is addressed in the revision process but which pops up again in another first draft. In other words, the standard process approach toward revision does not address the underlying strategy which produced the error in the first place and which will in all likelihood produce it again. It is most likely that the only way to identify the student's learning strategies is in a context of assisted production that includes the use of conferencing.

2.    A short-term study (one semester or less) is an insufficient time in which to expect improvement at the advanced level. Many of Mr. K.'s errors were neither easily identifiable nor easily correctable. For example, it is not easy to explain in a simple and straightforward manner why English allows us to say "the injured man" but not "the existed plan," yet explanation is essential or the student will have no idea as to why one is incorrect. Similarly, after explaining the necessity of marking count nouns with either an article or a plural morpheme, it is difficult to explain to a student whose native language has no articles, why the "ball" in "John threw the ball" is a count noun but the same noun in "John plays ball" is not. These concepts are neither easily grasped nor quickly mastered even for the most motivated student. As a result, it is not surprising that short-terms studies based on quantitative data tend to show that error correction is ineffective.

3.    Although the teacher cannot bring about cognitive restructuring, he or she can establish a context in which it can be facilitated by presenting the correct forms in a way that takes advantage of rather than conflicts with the student's learning strategies. These can only be discovered by encouraging the student to join the teacher as collaborator and evaluator, analyzing the errors and the meaning and explaining why the form was chosen.

4.    More attention should be given to the influence of L2 speech patterns in adult L2 writing. On the basis of the transcribed data, it seems naive to expect that Mr. K. might abandon the fossilized forms of his speech which serve him well in terms of communicative competence when putting pencil to paper. These are seen as well in

his quoted conversation in Essay #7 included here. While it is possible that the interlanguage of younger NNS is more "plastic," the study suggests that adult L2 writing may not improve if problems in adult L2 speech are ignored. Moreover, discussions with Mr. K. revealed that his extended social network was made up largely of Cantonese speakers. As a result, he had little need to communicate in English outside the classroom. This was probably a contributing factor in his speech patterns and may have perpetuated the fossilized forms which affected his L2 writing.

5.     Error correction in the context of focused feedback and assisted production provides the teacher with pedagogical insights into the problems of the advanced-level L2 writer. The study gave me an increased understanding of the enormous obstacles which face the most intelligent and motivated NNS in trying to master academic English writing. Discussing errors with the student demonstrated the difficulty of identifying and analyzing advanced learner errors and focused my attention on finding a way to explain these in a manner the student is able to understand and internalize. These are non-quantifiable benefits which nevertheless will influence my understanding of and teaching approach towards the adult NNS in the writing classroom.

6.     There is a real need for longitudinal studies with control groups and multivariate analysis techniques to tell us more about the long-term effects of error correction in the context of assisted production. If anything, this type of study reveals the complexity of the problems both teachers and adult students face in the advanced ESL writing classroom. However comparatively little research is available for teachers on the problems of advanced-level ESL writers and how to help them overcome the complex

syntactic and semantic errors that characterize their writing (cf., Lennon 1991).

**Summary**

While it is certainly not feasible for teachers to routinely engage in this type of research, having done so, I would recommend that ESL writing teachers try perhaps a reduced version of it as a means toward focusing their approach in trying to help students improve their writing skills. The assisted-production conferencing approach, far from treating errors in a punitive way, provides a vehicle for bonding in which the student is encouraged to think about how meaning is constructed, both in English and in his or her native language, and to focus consciously on the language-learning process in a way that is enlightening and enjoyable as well as being professionally valuable for the teacher. It remains for subsequent research to demonstrate that this approach results in long-term improvement on the part of the student.

ESSAY #1          What I Hope to Learn in the Course

As everybody knows, good writing is an important media② for expressing the①

academic ideas and works.  In this competitive era, although a wonderful idea or some

breakthroughs are very important in the academic field,④ how to explain them vividly④

and attract others' interest② are③ more important.  O'herwise, nobody knows their

value.  Especially for me--a non-native speaker of English, more barriers④ on correct

vocabulary usages②⑥ and better expressing④⑤ methods are also bothering me.

Since I am a Ph.D. student and I think there will be a lot of chance②④ for writing

reports, papers, thesis,② and so on, clear, precise writing are③ indispensable to me.  I

just wish④ to learn more about them⑥ in this course.

**ESSAY #7**     The Right to Smoke

I oppose that⑤ smokers have the right to smoke in public place②. The reason is so simple, any liberty must be prerequisited② without violating other's④ liberty⑥.

In this country, liberty is the highest criterion for people's thought and decision-making⑥. But every person is⑤ ought to do anything⑤ without going out① its limitation⑥. That limitation is not⑤ large nor small; it's just for you to think whether your behavior is against others⑥.

Smoking, proven⑤ from many medical research results, is not healthy to① us, although smokers are able to speak out④ hundreds of reason②, such as relax④, stimulus④, or happiness④. The worse⑤ is the "second-hand" smokers, if they are exposed to the① smoke for a long time, have more chance to get④ illness or even cancer than those "first-hand" smokers. Therefore, if some enjoy their smoking happily⑤ in the public area④, others will definitely become victims. Everyone has his (her) basic right to breathe fresh air, to avoid illness. And because everybody has the same right in the public areas, therefore, smoking should be prohibited over① there. Some one may argue that⑤, is that① "non-smokers' right② overcomes "smokers' right?②⑥ So the only areas are established for this requirement.⑥ I vote this.⑥

We can find out④⑤ the smoking areas are always filled up with smoke, hard⑤ for us to breathe. I have ever⑤ ask③ some of my friends who are smokers, "Do you feel comfortable when you become a "second-hand"④ rather than① "first-hand④?" They reply with the same answer, "Sure Not!⑤" Since those smokers do know the

feeling when they become a "second hand,"④ and if they smoke after thinking about the others' situation, they will not think "smoking prohibited in public place② is a deprivation of their right. That's a courtesy to the① others.

From the above argument, we can conclude, this kind of prohibiting④ is required. But if we can teach our next generation how evil of smoking⑤, that's the fundamental solution.

## SAMPLE OBSERVATION FORM

ESSAY # __7__

| TYPE OF ERROR | NUMBER OF TYPES . | T-UNIT ANALYSIS |
|---|---|---|
| Function Words | 7 | Total Number of T-units<br><br>22 |
| Grammatical Morphemes | 4 | |
| Agreement | 1 | Total Number of Words<br><br>270 |
| Diction | 13 | |
| Syntax | 15 | Words per T-Unit<br><br>12 |
| Semantics | 7 | |

Comments:

This essay illustrates several characteristics of Mr. K.'s writing that cannot be addressed by simply correcting a surface error. For example, it is not easy to explain what is wrong with the following sentence: "But every person is ought to do anything without going out its limitation." Another has to do with recurring sentence patterns such as the following: "Smoking, proven from many medical research results, is not healthy to us, although smokers are able to speak out hundreds of reason, such as relax, stimulus, or happiness." This sentence contains the same pattern I spent so much time explaining from his previous essay: "But we found, although we can solve a lot of problems human cannot do well like communication, computer..." Obviously, he has not been able to apply my explanation that "communication" and "computer" are not problems to this sentence in which he writes that "relax," "stimulus" and "happiness" are reasons. He also has trouble recognizing the difference between nominal and verbal forms (i.e., relax versus relaxation). Although this is often a problem in English (e.g., work), I believe identical forms can be used interchangeably in his native language so this may be a complicating factor.

The first sentence seems to be an attempt to use THAT complementation, which he rarely tries. This points up the difficulty NNS face in trying to reach an advanced level. How do you explain that we can say "I understand that smokers have the right..." or "I believe that smokers have the right..." or even "I suppose that smokers have the right..." but we cannot say "I oppose that smokers have the right..." I know that Mr. K. finds this very illogical and frustrating when I explain that words have selectional restrictions.

The purpose of this essay was to give the students an opportunity to practice argumentation, and, in fact, Mr. K. has done a pretty good job. His writing ranks high when judged in terms of content, organization, logical transitions, vocabulary, complexity of construction, and T-units. But his writing is marked by NNS constructions such as the following: "I have ever ask some of my friends who are smokers, 'Do you feel comfortable when you become a 'second-hand' rather than 'first-hand?' They reply with the same answer,

'Sure not!" These two sentences contain features that are quite advanced, such as the hyphenation of "first-hand" and "second-hand," the proper use of quotation and exclamation marks, the use of a relative clause, correct use of grammatical morphemes ("some of my friends," "smokers") and correct use of the definite and indefinite article. These are very significant accomplishments, even if he does not produce them systematically in his writing. I think what contributes to the very NNS flavor of these sentences is the fact that, unlike NNS students who find few opportunities in the U.S. to speak their own language, Mr. K. uses Cantonese most of the time in his social interactions. These two sentences may reflect what a Cantonese speaker might say in such an exchange.

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