Correcting ESL Learners' Writing

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Abstract: This study is based on an investigation into the traditional practice of checking learners' written work in their absence and providing correct versions of incorrect forms of expression. The survey was administered to 50 first-year non-English major students at ULAB. The findings maybe of particular help to course designers in ESL and ELT programmes. The paper also suuggests some effective means of correcting learners' scripts.

Due to imperfect knowledge or imperfect competence, the learners commit mistakes known as errors. There are three stages in error analysis. They are recognition, description and explanation. These are logically dependent upon one another. The teacher should recognize an error when it is committed. Description can only begin when recognition has taken place. The teacher should be able to give the description of error with the help of descriptive and contrastive analysis. Finally, he should explain the error to the students by mentioning where and what rules have been broken, substituted or ignored.

A learner may produce an utterance which is superficially deviant from the rules, or an utterance which is well-formed but does not have the meaning that the learner intended to mean. In both cases the utterance is erroneous. The first one is known as overtly erroneous (i.e. superficially well formed but not meaning what the learner intended to mean).

For the recognition of errors, we have the original erroneous utterance and we should also have plausible reconstructed utterances, i.e. what a learner should have said. The process of recognizing and identifying errors is then one of the comparing original utterances with their plausible and authoritative construction, thus enabling the learners to identify the differences.

The description of error is essentially a comparison of the original erroneous utterance with the plausible reconstructed utterance. Here we take help of descriptive and contrastive linguistics. The object in error analysis is to explain the error from both linguistic and psychological angles so that the learners learn why they have made the errors. The description of error is largely a linguistic activity, whereas explanation is the field of psycholinguistics.

It is concerned with accounting as to know why and how errors come about. There is a widely accepted theory of transfers, which states that a learner of a second language transfers onto his performance in the second language, the

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habits of his mother tongue. If the system of the first language resembles those of the second language, then we speak of facilitation, and where they differ, there is interference or, at least, a learning problem. According to this theory, the committing of errors is an inevitable, perhaps even a necessary part of the learning process. It also accounts for the similarity of many errors committed to the forms of the mother tongue. We can call these transfer errors. These are transposition or substitution or addition of a speech sound or morpheme, word or complete phrase or some sort of blend of these.

However, even when a learner knows a correct rule, he may still continue to make errors because he had not discovered the precise set of categories to which the rule applies. Errors of this sort are errors of over-generalization or analogical errors. This is not surprising that errors like "he singed," "he cans come" and "many mans" are produced by learners with any mother tongue other than English.

Contrastive linguistics is concerned with comparing two or more different languages at various linguistic levels at any given point of time. Such a descriptive comparison serves to show how any two languages differ from each other on their sound pattern, grammatical structure and vocabulary. This type of analysis can be used in language teaching to point out the areas where the similarities and contrasts between the two languages are present. The stimulus to this activity was provided in 1957 through the publication of Robert Lado's book, *Linguistics across culture*.

As we are aware, when a child learns his native language he develops his native language behaviour too. Gradually this behaviour becomes stronger and stronger. In learning the second language, the learner is influenced very much by his native language behaviour. Where the structures of the two languages are the same, no difficulty is anticipated. Where the structure of the second language differs from that of the native language, we can expect both difficulty in learning and error in performance. The bigger the differences between the languages, the greater the difficulties will be in learning a second foreign language, and learning a foreign langauge is essentially learning to overcome these difficulties. In other words, learning a second language means changing one's native language behaviour to that of the speakers of the target language.

Here, the contrastive analysis will be more useful. It will discover the differences between languages and will predict the difficulties that the learner will have. Teaching will be directed at those points where there are structural differences. This in turn determines what the learner has to learn and what the teacher has to teach. For instance, a Bengali learner who is learning English has to be provided contrastive data by the teacher.

It is generally said that human languages are alike at the level of conceptual structures and are different at the level of surface structures. Every language has

a set of laws and rules used by its speakers. These rules differ from language to language. Here, we have to analyze the syntactic structures of both languages with the help of contrastive analysis.

To the best of my knowledge, there is not much research on the correction of learners' writing. In his book *Mistakes and Correction*, Julian Edge says that teachers 'have to be sure that they are using correction positively to support learning' (Ancker 2000:20). According to Jeremy Harmer (http://www.eltfourm.com/fourm), "correction is a very subtle matter. Gentle re-formulation is often useful, when the student has a chance of correcting himself in passing. The best time to correct is as late as possible." Moreover, as he says, "teachers have the problem of dominating students, and therefore such correction can be counter-productive. Correction is done appropriately if it is supportive, offers insight and does not interrupt language learning/acquiring opportunities."

There are many factors to consider regarding when, what and how to correct. Correction of oral performance is carried out differently from the correction of written work. Whatever kind of error rectification a teacher conducts s/he must remember Michael Lewis's message that "you never correct a mistake, you always correct a person" (Bartram & Walton 1991:93). Moreover, there are three reasons why the active involvement of students in the process of dealing with mistakes is important: it stimulates active learning, induces cooperative atmosphere, and develops independent learners (Bartram & Waltonn 1991:81).

An updated theory on errors, corrective feedback and classroom practice in spoken language is described by Ancker (2000:20), who claims that "error correction remains one of the most contentious and misunderstood issues in the second and foreign language teaching profession." It is also pointed out that the teacher's correction does not always work. Students often correct each other, which is very important because self-correction or peer correction helps to focus student attention on errors and to reduce reliance on the teacher, thereby encouraging student autonomy (Ancker 2000:23).

In the light of the above theoretical description, the present study attempts to find out some ways of correcting learners' writing.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to report the research data on learners' perceptions of teachers' correction and learner (peer) self-correction of written assignments. The findings give some insights into the role of correction and self-correction in mitigating or even eradicating the learner's fear of mistakes, facilitating process of learning by developing language awareness and encouraging learner-autonomy in learning English.

Drawing on the data collection method of Santos (1988), the data for the present investigation were collected from short composition on "An Eid Holiday That You Enjoyed," written by 50 new semester students at ULAB, Dhaka. Then I

identified 14 incomprehensible sentences (Presented in Table 1) from them. The process of recognizing and identifying errors is comparing original utterance with their authoritative construction and identify the differences. The category of errors is presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Erroneous sentences & their authoritative reconstructions

Erroneous sentences	Authoritative reconstructions
1. I enjoy my Eid festival very happy.	I celebrated Eid holiday with great joy and excitement.
2. I going to our relative houses and friends.	I visited the houses of my relatives and my friends.
3. The second day of Eid, we vary Enjoy this day.	I enjoyed very much on the second day of Eid festival.
4. I was taken many breakfast.	I ate a hearty breakfast.
5. I completed my pray.	I said my prayer.
6. Eid is the most joys day of every muslim after one month of Ramadan.	At the end of a month-long fasting, Muslims all over the world observe Eid-ul-Fitr.
7. In our country last Eid day was occurred on 14 the October.	Eid-ul-Fitr was celebrated last year across the county on October 14 with much festivity.
8. In Eid day I weak up 6:00 am.	I woke up at 6 o'clock in the morning on Eid Day.
9. I was went first time ever in time.	I went to Cox's Bazaar for the first time.
10. Eid day is publick holiday	Eid Day is a public holiday.
11. We are went to the cinema hall to sow a film.	We went to a cinema hall to watch a film.
12. Then I saw Television.	I was watching TV shows on that day.
13. I pray for God sufficient Bangladesh.	I prayed to God for the prosperity of Bangladesh.
14. After passing the pray I joined with my friends.	I met some of my friends after saying prayer.

Table 2: Categorization of errors

Erroneous sentence	Error or Error Pattern
1.	Tense, wrong word order
2.	Tense, wrong word order
3.	Wrong tense, inappropriate word

4.	Wrong passive construction
5.	Inappropriate word
6.	Wrong word order
7.	Wrong article, inappropriate word
8.	Wrong preposition and omission of preposition, wrong word
9.	Incorrect use of past tense, wrong word order
10.	Wrong spelling
11.	Wrong spelling, wrong tense, wrong word
12.	Wrong tense, inappropriate word
13.	Wrong tense, wrong word
14.	Inappropriate word, wrong tense, wrong word order

The research shows that grammar mistakes and inadequate and inappropriate vocabulary aggravate the quality of student's written work. Because of frequent grammatical errors, it is very difficult to understand what is being communicated except for the occasional correct sentence. For that reason learners' intended meanings in erroneous constructions largely vary from learner's intentions in those sentences.

The study finds out that our students cannot write correct sentences because they are weak in tense, preposition, article, spelling, word order and sentence structure. The students have a tendency to translate from Bangla into English directly not knowing the structural differences between the two languages (Rashid 2001). Most of the students don't know the correct use of words because they have poor reading habits and they rarely use dictionary for the appropriate usage of words. They also learn inadequate number of words. As a result, they use inadequate and inappropriate words for their writings. As the learners have limited vocabulary, their written content is limited or sometimes completely inappropriate.

The research shows that students are also weak in spelling. They are not aware about the fact that English is a language that is not consistent in its representation of sounds, that is there are differences between spoken and written English. The spelling system causes problems in both directions—a learner may know a word orally but may not be able to write it correctly, or they may see a word written but not know how to pronounce it or learn wrong pronunciation. For this reason, learning to spell in English is a challenging task.

The learners also have problems in using tenses. English has a relatively large number of tenses with some quite subtle differences in their usage. Most learners

of English find this difficult to master. They find it difficult to manipulate the various ways in which English uses the first auxiliary verb of a tense.

The most difficult area for learners of English is the idiom and phrasal verb of the language. Phrasal verbs in English cause a lot of problems for most learners. This is because many phrasal verbs have several meanings and different syntactic patterns.

Another problem of learners is the usage of prepositions. The difficulties are two-fold: native tongue interference and the fact that prepositions are embedded in the idiom of the language. What the native English learn by instinct has got to be learned by non-native speakers by sheer practice and memorization.

All these problems are arising because the learners do not know the structural differences between the two languages and they prefer learning the language through grammar-translation method. They learn some English words and they learn the rules. Instead of treating grammar as a set of rules to be memorized in isolation, grammar items should be integrated into the lesson allowing grammar to assume a more meaningful role in the learning of English writing.

Learning a foreign language is a step-by-step process, during which mistakes are to be expected at all stages of learning. Fear of making mistakes prevents learners from being receptive and responsive. Overcoming fear of mistakes depends on the way mistakes are rectified.

Language acquisition does not happen unless the learner is relaxed and keen on learning. In order to overcome learners' fear it is essential to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in language classrooms, to encourage cooperation through peer work or small group work and apply techniques for language acquisition that suit and involve individual learners.

Another aspect of overcoming fear of mistakes is the way mistakes can be remedied. Majority of ESL teachers assume an active role in error rectification, while learners prefer being passive and rely on teachers to point out their mistakes. In the long run, this approach is neither efficient nor efficacious, particularly in treating the so-called 'fossilized' errors.

The contemporary emphasis on learner-centeredness and autonomy suggests that in some settings learner's self-correction of errors might be more beneficial for language learning than teacher's correction.

Making mistakes is a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of cognition. Mistakes that occur in the process of learning a foreign language are caused either by the interference of the mother tongue or developmental reasons and are part of the students' interlanguage (Harmer, 2001:99).

Error correction is often done by the teacher providing corrections for mistakes made by students. However, it is probably more effective for students to correct

their own mistakes. According to Hamid (2007), teachers in many cases fail to correctly interpret learners' intended meanings. Learners may be given practice in self-correction of their own work either individually or in pairs but only if they prefer peer cooperation. However, in my opinion, students definitely need training in rectifying mistakes independently, i.e. without teacher's interference. At the end of error self-correction activity, teacher's feedback is crucial and must be performed in a way to have a long-term positive effect on students' ability to monitor their own performance.

ESL practitioners agree that error correction is an essential condition for successful acquisition of any language, although they are at variance on ways of conducting it. Reconciliation of viewpoints might be secured by turning to self-correction. The prevailing opinion among some practitioners is that the teachers' primary task in initiating self-correction in written work is to indicate the mistakes, but not correct them.

The case for grammar correction in writing classes is based on the idea that if a teacher points out to a student a grammatical error they have made, and provides, indirectly or directly, the correct form, the student will then understand the mistake they have made, learn from it, and their ability to write accurately will improve. It is also widely felt that if teachers do not correct their students' grammatical mistakes, 'fossilization' will occur, and it will become very difficult later to eliminate these errors. Studies have shown these arguments to be incorrect.

Numerous studies have revealed that grammar correction to second language writing is actually discouraging to many students, and even harmful to their writing ability (Semke 1984; Kepner 1991; Sheppard 1992 and Truscott 1996). Generally those who do not receive grammar corrections have a more positive feeling about writing than those who do, write more, and with more complexity. Moreover, the time spent by students and teachers on correcting grammatical errors causes need attention to be sidetracked from other important elements of writing, like organization and logical development of content.

The first reason that grammar feedback doesn't work in a writing class is that it treats only the surface appearance of grammar and not the way language develops. Secondly, learning grammar in a second language is a complex and gradual process which occurs both developmentally and hierarchically (some items are acquired before others). Compounding this is the fact that the learning of linguistic items does not occur in a linear fashion, that the learning curve for an item is full of valleys and peaks, progress and regressions. Therefore, for grammatical correction to work, the correction must be precisely tied into the correct levels of this process. If a student is given a correction for a stage he has not yet reached, it would not be effective. In order to offer useful corrections, a teacher would need to precisely know where the student is developmentally and

hierarchically in terms with their grammar level. Yet because of the complexity involved in learning grammar, this would be a virtual impossibility.

The third reason for the ineffectiveness of grammar correction involves the practicalities associated with teachers' authoritative reconstructions and students' intended meanings in their erroneous sentences. Language teachers can correctly reconstruct the meanings intended by second language learners on their erroneous constructions. But the result suggests that teachers on many cases fail to correctly interpret learners' intended meanings. According to Zamel (1995), teachers also commonly misread students' texts and evoke abstract rules and principles in their comments. Moreover, students often find teachers' remarks vague, confusing, and contradictory, and feel that teachers do not provide sufficient grammatical explanations about their writing mistakes (Cohen 1987). Finally, students generally only make a mental note of the corrections they have understood, and if they have to rewrite their papers, they do not incorporate these corrections into their work.

So what should a second language writing teacher do? The quickest and most effective solution would be for writing instructors to simply stop making grammar corrections. This would of course be difficult for teachers to do because it has been shown most students strongly expect teachers to notice their writing errors and comment on them, and they become quite resentful if this does not occur. Adding to this pressure to give grammar feedback is the fact that established curriculum of many language school and university writing programs is based on the value of grammar correction and if a teacher did not employ it, they would have a good chance of being considered unprofessional.

One possible solution to this problem which I have found to be useful is to give periodic short grammatical problems (e.g. articles, prepositions) that I encounter in the students' homework. This usually has gone over well and generally satisfied the students' need for grammatical correction feedback. After all, teachers should devote their time to areas like logical development of ideas and arguments and effectiveness of introduction, thesis statement and conclusion in learners' compositions. In short, teachers need to train themselves to set aside their red pens and examine ideas and see what students are trying to say instead of simply looking for grammatical errors.

If ESL/EFL writing teachers are really concerned with improving their student's grammatical competency, they should, in lieu of offering grammar correction feedback, constantly stress in their classes the importance of outside reading. Studies have shown that voluntary, light, authentic reading (graphic novels, comics, the easy section of newspapers, popular literature) in the target language greatly helps the overall writing and grammatical skills of second language students.

Learners can also develop their writing by practicing free writing. When students learn about free writing method in class, students often struggle with it at first but eventually come to find it extremely helpful and very useful. They should practice free writing by keeping in mind that they should not worry about grammar or spelling and they should not stop writing for any reason. What really makes free writing useful is its focus on generating ideas and getting thoughts out of learners' head and on to paper. If students make errors in spelling and grammar, they can correct those later when they will edit it. While students are revising their writing, teachers can also give attention to their sentence skill. The teachers will guide them to correct the sentences to make sense of their writing according to the context.

Another important aspect of error correction is adopting a positive attitude to student writing. While marking mechanically teachers may not realize that they are showing the students only their mistakes, that is, the negative points. If the students receive only negative feedback, they may easily be discouraged from trying to form complex structures and using new vocabulary. However, feedback sessions can be a beneficial experience for the students if the teachers show the strong points as well.

Another important point to consider while correcting errors is the amount of correction on the end product. In academic writing, the end product is expected to have a wide range of vocabulary, correct grammar, meaningful punctuation, accurate spelling, varied sentence structures, unity and coherence in ideas and well-supported and explained major points.

If the teacher tries to make comments and corrections on the final version of the student paper, the teacher would be exhausted; rather the better thing for the teacher to do is to correct the writing while the students are in the process of writing. That is, while the student is planning and organizing his ideas, the teacher can comment on the unity and coherence of ideas. Or while the student is writing his draft, the teacher can proofread for word-order, subject-verb agreement, spelling mistakes. This gradual checking can minimize the exhaustive red marks on the student paper. Another advantage of such correction is that the student sees these comments when the writing experience is still fresh in his mind.

Another strategy for decreasing teacher writing on a student paper is to use some kind of "code." This list of symbols which shows typical mistakes can be found in writing guides such as APA or MLA or the teacher can come up with one like this:

Code	Explanation	Example sentence
WF	Wrong form	The strong^{WF} of Hercules amazed the spectators
WT	Wrong tense	I knew^{WT} him for years.
Sp	Wrong spelling	Seperate^{Sp}

For such a code to be useful for the students, they should he familiar with it beforehand. If teachers think photocopying would not be enough, they could post an enlarged version on the wall of the class as well. Seeing the common mistakes on the wall may also reduce the number of student mistakes.

Providing constructive feedback to the student, using a special code for proofreading, and editing a student paper through planning and drafting stages are some suggested ways for correcting and giving feedback to student writing.

The outcome of the study should have significance for the areas of error identification, error correction and feedback and can thus be very useful and informative for language teachers and researchers.

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