



# LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

*Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs*

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## ERROR CORRECTION in WRITING

One of the greatest challenges ELLs face with academic content is how to write coherently and accurately. Second language (L2) writers differ from native language (L1) writers as they progress through stages of language acquisition because they often negatively transfer their L1 language features, have incomplete knowledge of English, and are still in the process of acquiring precise, connotative word use. As a result, writing errors in particular are inevitable.

A number of research studies have proven the value of error correction, especially if it results in independent self-editing. Error correction is a perfect opportunity for teachers to inform learners about word choice, language features, and sentence accuracy *in any content subject*. This *Bulletin* provides suggestions for error correction.

### ERROR CORRECTION GUIDELINES

#### Direct vs. Indirect Feedback

*Direct feedback* enables teachers to provide the correct word, word form, phrase, or rewritten sentence for student transcription; *indirect feedback* allows teachers to indicate that an error has been made but leaves it up to the writer to solve

the problem and correct the error. In general, indirect feedback is more helpful to students since it leads to greater cognitive engagement, reflection, and problem-solving in writing.

#### Coded vs. Uncoded Feedback

In *coded feedback* errors such as "subject-verb agreement" or "plural form" are labeled; in *uncoded feedback* the teacher circles or underlines an error but leaves it to the writer to diagnose and solve the problem. There is no significant difference in writer accuracy with regard to coded or uncoded feedback; rather, consistency paired with individual mini-lessons highlighting the specific error(s) results in long term progress.

#### Types of Errors

*Global errors* interfere with the comprehensibility of a text ("The potato harvest was at its pick<sup>st</sup>"); *local errors* are minor and do not impede understanding ("Portland is a very beauty\* city"). The globalness, or seriousness, of particular errors vary from writer to writer. Another dimension to errors is *treatable vs. untreatable*: *Treatable errors* are related to a language structure which occurs in a

rule-governed way (verb tenses and forms; subject-verb agreement; article usage, plural and possessive noun endings; sentence fragments; run-on sentences; word form errors; and punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors). *Untreatable errors* are idiosyncratic and include word choice, sentence word order, and missing or unnecessary words.

### Forms of Error Feedback

One-on-one conferences with students, regardless of the topic discussed, are more effective than handwritten commentary or corrections. Feedback of any type, however, is beneficial if it comes *during* rather than *at the end of* the writing process. Students' accuracy improves when they must revise their papers after receiving error feedback.

### Summary

1. Point out errors; do not let students search for them;
2. In addition to ideas and organization, feedback on grammar is extremely important;
3. Cumbersome or confusing marking systems are frustrating to students; in other words, keep it simple;
4. Strategies for overcoming errors are welcome and helpful;
5. In correcting, the color of the ink used does not make any difference.

### STRATEGIES FOR ERROR CORRECTION

**1. Error feedback is most effective when it focuses on patterns of error.** Understanding the types of errors ELLs make is important and specific: while native English writers *generally* have difficulty with punctuation, pronoun references, and formal vs. informal usage, ELLs have varying errors *specific to their level of proficiency and the nature of their home language*. These include verb tenses

and forms; articles and noun endings; word choice; and sentence structure. As a result, it is important to look for the patterns each individual writer displays.

**2. Prioritize error feedback for individual students.** Focus on errors that students frequently make. Perform an on-the-spot error analysis of the student text by reading through the paper quickly and identifying two or three frequent patterns of errors.

**3. Provide simultaneous correction of content and form.** General feedback about errors along with commentary about ideas and organization is helpful to ELLs, because in their struggles as second language learners they are naturally sensitive to how language works.

**4. Although indirect feedback elicits more reflective and analytical focus on student writing, do not discount direct feedback.** In particular, untreatable errors may require direct feedback because there is no rule to which students can turn for correction. Remember, however, that misuse or overuse of direct feedback can easily lead to "teacher appropriation" of the text.

**5. "Uncontrollable sentences", (i.e., sentences with an abundance of errors) should be either entirely rewritten or broken down into smaller sentences.** Provide a sentence prompt which seems to fit and have the writer rewrite it or use something he/she deems more appropriate.

**6. Remember alternatives to error feedback: peer feedback and self-evaluation.** Error correction is important; however, strategic planning is also important in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed with the enormity of helping students struggle to become accurate, organized and coherent in their writing.

SOURCE:

Ferris, Dana R. (2005). Treatment of Error in Second Language Writing. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.