

Error Diaries: Making the Most of Correction and Self-editing

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Abstract

Error diaries are a three-step technique for students to learn from their errors after their papers have been corrected. The first step is to select the error for follow-up. The second step is to rewrite the corrected passage and underline the corrected structure. The third step is to practice the corrected structure by creating new sentences. This stage, practice, is often neglected in discussion and treatment of error. While controversy continues about the value of correction, both research and teaching practice point to the need to distinguish between different types of error and treatments of error. Error diaries might provide a tool to help students produce reasonably accurate language, at least in the short-term.

One of the greatest challenges facing teachers and students of English as a second language is how to deal with lingering errors. The efficacy of grammar instruction has been the subject of long-term, ongoing controversy and research in the literature on second language acquisition (see, e.g., Long, 1983 and Han & Selinker, 1999). At the City University of New York where I teach English as a Second Language, all students (both native and non-native) must pass a timed essay exam to qualify for entry to freshman composition. Passing the exam is also a requirement for entry to a senior college; thus students who do not pass are often required to temporarily attend a community college. The exam is graded holistically, with positive consideration given to a well-developed, cohesive essay; yet a preponderance of mistakes does impact negatively on the evaluation of the student.

Entrance and exit testing are high-stakes situations. Thus, students need to be able to produce correct or near-correct target language structures on demand. Ellis (1998) distinguishes between the practical knowledge of teachers and the technical knowledge of researchers, cautioning against placing technical knowledge in an exalted position when it is clearly the needs of classrooms that should drive practice, something almost any teacher would agree with. In other words, while the effect of instruction on a student's long-term interlanguage remains an object of research, students' immediate academic needs require practical pedagogical strategies.

In an attempt to help students overcome the obstacle of lingering errors in their timed writing, I have implemented the use of error diaries. Error diaries consist of a multi-part, ideally self-generated log to give students practice in using troubling structures with a higher degree of accuracy.

Error Correction and the Research

One compelling reason to work on error correction is that students expect it. Leki (1991) surveyed 100 ESL students from a broad range of language backgrounds taking freshman composition and the results indicated that students expect teachers to correct their work. In her study, students claim some preference for an indication of tense correction on verbs. Nonetheless, she found students report paying more attention to comments on content and organization than they do to specific correction of language items. At the same time, Ferris (1995) found that students "both attend to and appreciate their teachers' pointing out their grammatical problems" (p. 48). Schultz' (1996) research raises the issue that students' expectations of correction are often at odds with teachers' beliefs in its usefulness, yet she points out that not meeting student expectation can be problematic.

In addition to student expectation is the question of whether correction is effective. Ferris (1999) responds to Truscott's claim that grammar correction is ineffective and possibly harmful. She points out that in Truscott's review of other studies, little distinction is made in the type of error correction offered. Thus, we can conclude that more research needs to be done with reference to the specific techniques of correction. Additionally, Ferris notes that the subjects in these studies have not been comparable, the research paradigms and teaching strategies vary and few of the studies involved ESL college students. She singles out Fathman and Whalley's study of ESL college students that found positive results for error correction. One area where both Truscott and Ferris are in agreement is with respect to the notion that syntactic, morphological, and lexical knowledge are acquired differently. Ferris suggests that correction can be made more effective if teachers are trained to identify and correct varying types and patterns of errors. In particular, teachers can make a distinction between errors of word choice and rule-based errors such as those made with verb tenses—that is, not all errors should be handled in the same way. Chandler (2003) in an experimental study found the technique of underlining to be superior to the technique of describing types of errors for achieving a reduction in the frequency of long-term error.

In addition to the selection and treatment of error, there is also the question of how instruction addressing the error can be effectively delivered. Ellis (1998) characterizes correction, termed negative evidence, as only one of four options in providing form-focused instruction. The other three are: providing structured input, giving explicit instruction, and lastly, requiring production practice. He proffers that while production practice "may not enable learners to integrate entirely new grammatical structures into their interlanguages, it may help them use partially acquired structures more fluently and more accurately" (p. 51).

Technique: The Error Diary: A Three-step Process

The approach to correction that I have been using over the last six years is the **error diary**. It is, in effect, a post-correction technique since it involves doing follow-up work after an essay draft or in-class writing has been reviewed (and, yes, corrected) by the teacher. It is a three-step technique that could be classified as chiefly utilizing two options of the form-focused instruction that Ellis describes: negative evidence and production practice with some attention given to explicit instruction. The first part requires that the student (or teacher) select an error and then copy it. This is an example of Ellis' negative evidence. The second part is for the student to rewrite the phrase or sentence correctly. To some extent, this is where explicit instruction might be required, either from the teacher, peers, or as a result of the student's own analysis. The third part is for the student to engage in production practice by using the correct structure in further examples. I would argue that production practice is vital and often overlooked.

I. Error selection

The first step is error selection. Not all errors should be selected and thus, the question arises as to whether the teacher or the student should make the choice. When I first began using error diaries, I asked students to select their own errors. I wanted them to become aware of those errors in their writing which were persistent, that is, to focus on aspects of the language they were already familiar with but had so far been unsuccessful at using consistently in the correct form. I believed that the persistent errors would be the ones to target and also, students would be more likely to notice these errors. Students routinely claim that they could have avoided these errors because they do know the correct structure but have simply forgotten it or neglected to use it at the moment of writing. I advised them to ignore one-time only, more idiosyncratic mistakes. Over time I found that some students are, not at all surprisingly, better than others at making the selection of errors that are more useful for further work (or at least the ones I would have chosen!).

Errors can also be analyzed from the point of view of 1) errors that are also committed by native speakers of English, 2) errors typical of ESL students from various language backgrounds and 3) errors particular to specific language backgrounds. By referring to some of the errors of a Polish student at the next-to-highest level of ESL instruction at my institution, I can offer examples of each type. In one instance, she writes, "many of them is selfish." The error in subject-verb agreement would not be uncommon in papers written by native English speakers. She also writes "saleing drugs" for "selling drugs;" again, not atypical for native or non-native speakers. However, "single family kids are raising" (substituting "raising" for "raised"), is an error that a native speaker would probably be less likely to make whereas it is a common confusion for non-

native speakers from many different language backgrounds. A similar instance is found when she writes "attendance must be taking," although here, the phonological similarity of "taking" and "taken" could also confuse the native speaker writer. When this student makes errors with articles, however, the errors are more likely to be specific to her Polish language background. She writes in one instance, "in a summer time," substituting "a" for "the" and in another case, "school is not a some kind of fashion show," adding "a" as an additional determiner in front of "some."

While determining the underlying cause of the error is not necessary to utilize error diaries, it may be useful for the teacher to have a loose framework for different categories of errors for the purposes of instruction. Some errors may be phonologically based, as mentioned above with the example of "taking" versus "taken." Students also often confuse the words "live" and "leave" because the vowel sounds are not distinct in their native languages. Phonological errors seem to emerge frequently under the pressure of extemporaneous writing and are also common for native speakers. Even I will reread my e-mails (hopefully before I press "send") to sometimes find I have substituted "your" for "you're."

There are other errors that appear to stem from grammatical confusions. For example, "it's depend " for the correct "it depends" is an error I have found made by students of varying language backgrounds, including Haitian Creole and Korean. Another example could be sentences that begin with "there are." An example from a Korean student is "there are a lot of good programs are made." The repeated main verb can be either eliminated through ellipsis or subordinated with "which" or "that." Then there are errors which may be phonologically based or grammatically based or a combination of the two. For example, errors with final "ed" may be more prevalent in contexts where the "ed" does not appear as a separate syllable so that the "ed" is not heard by the writer. Examples are: "you will recognized the problem" and "couples are concern about their children." Of course it is an open question whether persistent errors with "ed" are based on faulty syntactic knowledge or are phonologically based. They are probably best considered an interaction of the two. Categorizing or analyzing the source of the errors (part of explicit instruction) can be a useful option either in one-to-one communication with students or as an additional step in the procedure.

Step one of the procedure is completed when the student copies the incorrect sentence or enough of the sentence to put the error in context and underlines the error. When I first implemented this procedure, I found many students would not copy enough of the faulty phrase to clearly show the error in context. If they, for example, merely copied the word "leave" or a verb with or without an "ed," it would not be clear why there was an error. Again, teacher intervention in what could otherwise be a student-driven process has proven to be necessary, at least until the students become familiar with the error diary technique.

II. Error correction

The next step of the procedure is rather simple. Students rewrite the sentence correctly and underline the corrected portion. This step of the procedure combines different elements of Ellis' classification but is probably closest to "explicit instruction," which Ellis divides into "direct instruction" and "consciousness raising." Students are in essence reviewing, and in some cases, learning about, correct usage and grammatical rules. While this part of the procedure should not present problems, there is always the possibility that more errors will emerge.

For example, a Cantonese-speaking ESL student produced the following entries:

A. Error: **I glad** to hear our community have money to improve the quality of instruction at ...

Correction: **I'm glad** to hear our community have money to improve the quality of instruction at ...

B. Error: **Provide** more high technology into classroom can help students save more time.

Correction: **Providing** more high technology into classroom can help students save more time.

C. Error: **On** our schools **there have** not enough computers to provide for student.

Correction: **In** our schools **there are** not enough computers to provide for student.

In all of the examples, additional errors from the original phrases were not corrected. In A, there is an agreement problem with the verb *have* while in B, the plural form is missing from *classroom*. In C where the student attempts two corrections, the extra preposition *for* remains at the end of the sentence and again, there is the missing plural form on *student*.

III. Production practice

The third and last step of the procedure is the one that appears to give students the most difficulty: production practice. Students are required to produce several new sentences that utilize the problematic structure. I have observed several pitfalls. The main one is that without supervision, many students will skip this step, a clear sign that students find it difficult. Another pitfall occurs when a student has selected an overly unusual or specific sentence to work on in the error diary. It may, therefore, not be so easy to come up with another sentence utilizing the same structure. One student, a speaker of Bhasa Indonesian, used the phrase "various field knowledge" rather than "various fields of knowledge." Without guidance on the use of the collocations "fields of" such as "fields of inquiry" and "fields of study," it would probably be very difficult for the student to come up with novel sentences to practice this structure. Another problem is that many students will only come up with overly simple or personal examples; that is, sentences that would not find a place in more academic writing. For example, a student might have made an error using the phrase "even though." A common error is to use it as a sentence fragment rather than connecting it to the main clause, for example, "Even though attendance is required. Many students still absent from class." A student might also use the structure in a sentence with personal content rather than "academic" content such as "Even though I don't like spicy food, I eat it sometimes." Nonetheless, the new sentence has given the student some limited practice in correct usage.

For the practice sentences in the error diary entries by the Cantonese-speaking student referred to above, the production of simple sentences appears for the correction of *I'm glad*:

A. I'm glad to know my good friend will come here.

I'm glad to know you will marry.

I'm glad to play with my nephew in the garden.

I'm glad is not a particularly difficult structure and since it is also personal, her choice of simple personal sentences is not surprising.

Kenkel and Yates (2003) describe the difficulty native speaking writers in remedial classes have in managing textual information in their essays. Their findings support giving students the challenge of managing contextually complex content. Similarly, if ESL students merely practice the structures they find difficult by constructing simplistic sentences, they might not be adequately prepared to write college-level essay compositions. It is thus important when utilizing the error diary procedure to have students write on topics that are at a suitably challenging level.

Finally, in the practice sentences of the third step of the error diaries, students will often make new mistakes. The teacher must decide whether to correct and how much to correct regarding these new errors. The Cantonese student's other practice sentences exhibit the problem of new errors although, (or perhaps because), academic content remains at a similar level to the original:

B. Providing a new housing to lower income families can help them to have a good environment. (unnecessary article "a" before new housing)

Providing a quiet place to students. (wrong preposition "to")

C. In our schools **there are** many books to provide for students. (again, a preposition error)

In our schools **there are** many places for student to study. (missing plural)

In our schools **there are** many professors are good teacher. (here there is the more syntactically troubling lack of the relative pronoun *who* in addition to the missing plural form of *teacher*)

Effectiveness: Some Reports from Practice

This three-step procedure is by no means sufficient in eradicating persistent errors. Many teachers have encountered students who simply want to have a ready-made formula for successfully passing an exam. As an anecdote, I can give the example of one student who was quite diligent about completing his work yet wanted to stick to a formula for all of his compositions. Regardless of how uninspiring this may seem, the more serious practical problem was that his formulaic sentences weren't even accurate. Nearly every second paragraph began with the sentence, "there are two proposals have been presented." I corrected this sentence every time and the student did the error diaries I assigned to him. In exasperation, I wrote on one of his papers that I was tired of correcting the same error over and over again. I followed this up with a face-to-face apology during one of our regular writing conferences, explaining my frustration, and the problem was apparently eradicated, at least temporarily. The student succeeded in passing the exam, yet I imagine he continues to make the same mistake.

I cannot claim that using error diaries will reliably increase passing rates on high stakes exams. From my own experience, my classes have varied in their success with this technique but I have noticed that when I am consistent in my expectations that students follow through with the procedure, not just in self-editing but especially in the third part of the technique, production practice, students appear to do better. As one additional anecdote, when I first began using error diaries and was not as careful about making sure that all students were keeping up with the task, I did have one student who was very diligent and

had filled a notebook with over two hundred carefully prepared entries. When she first came to the class, a six-week intensive, I honestly felt (privately) she had little chance of passing. After she passed the exam in spite of my initial expectations, she came to see me and showed me her notebook, telling me she had done this in addition to writing essays everyday (probably more helpful for the purposes of the exam) and always between 11 at night and two in the morning since she was divorced and had a small child.

Of course, had I checked her diary regularly I would not have been surprised. More to the point, most students do require regular feedback and monitoring of their error diaries. In the crush of other curricular demands, giving feedback on error diaries can be daunting, but I would suggest that once students are underway, the error diaries should be reviewed every few weeks.

As a future direction for the use of the error diary technique, I am currently working on structured input, one of Ellis' other categories of form-focused instruction. To provide structured input, I am compiling typical student errors and then creating model sentences to present to students so that, aside from having students learn from their mistakes, I, as the teacher, am providing examples of target usage of the structure. In effect, it means my doing an expanded version of what the students are doing in their own production practice during the third step of their error diaries. The end result will be a mini-corpus of correct examples of structures students have failed to correctly produce. This part of the process could result in more useful and extensive materials.

I am hopeful that when students focus on and practice structures that have so far eluded them, it might help push their interlanguage along. Even if it is not a permanent change, students may be able to remember phrases and structures in the short-term that could help them produce more accurate language under the monitored conditions of essay-exam testing. It is at these moments, especially when the tests have high-stakes outcomes, that students need to be accurate. Beyond short-term gains, I think most teachers and language learners would concur that focusing on structural elements and practicing their use could have a beneficial impact on acquiring the target language with greater accuracy.

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