

At the beginning of one semester, I asked my students to evaluate their performance in speaking, listening, reading and writing. The results showed that most considered writing to be their weakest skill. They said that they had difficulties identifying and correcting mistakes in their compositions when asked to do so. They also indicated that accuracy was a priority for them, and that they believed that work on errors helped them learn. I personally believe that written texts, as permanent documents, should contain as few

Correction techniques

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discovers that what her
students prefer isn't
necessarily what they need.

mistakes as possible. Error correction work can make learners aware that texts may and should be revised and changed until they become reasonably accurate. I decided to do some research into what kind of error correction worked best for my group of intermediate students, aged 15–25, in a private language school in Rio de Janeiro.

What to correct?

The first thing to consider was the type of error to focus on. Since the students were anxious about accuracy, I felt that I should provide feedback on both global and local errors.

How to correct?

Next, I had to decide what correction techniques to use. A great number of techniques for correction have been proposed in recent years. I decided to use those which did not simply provide students with the correct answers. Instead, my techniques aimed to make them think and correctly analyse their mistakes. I believe that students profit more if they have to make a mental effort in order to arrive at the correct answers; in this way they will be testing their own hypotheses about language. I chose five techniques, intending to use them in order:

- 1 Mistakes underlined and each type of mistake coded with symbols or abbreviations

- 2 Codes just written next to the line where a mistake occurs
- 3 Just a cross written next to a line where a mistake occurs (students have to find the mistake)
- 4 Peer-correction: students underline mistakes in their classmates' work and provide the correction
- 5 Self-correction, without indication of mistakes: students hand in their compositions and get them back without comments (they then have to edit them alone).

There was a reason for the order in which I placed these techniques. Technique 1 provides guidance in finding and correcting mistakes. There is progressively less guidance in the other techniques and finally no guidance at all in technique 5. In this way, I hoped gradually to make students aware that there are mistakes (caused by memory or time constraints) which they can correct if they carefully review their texts. Students sometimes do not believe that they can correct certain mistakes themselves. My purpose was to show that sometimes they do know what is right.

Questionnaires and interviews

I used questionnaires and interviews (both in English) to determine the students' preferences with regard to error correction techniques. They answered the questionnaires at home after receiving each composition with feedback. The interviews were conducted in class after the questionnaires were handed in.

The writing tasks

The same basic procedure was used with four writing tasks: there was some preparation in class (discussion about the topic and about the organisation of the composition) and then the compositions were written at home. I marked them and the students re-wrote them, taking into account my feedback.

Composition 1

Students wrote about a classmate's life, likes and dislikes based on interviews. I marked the compositions using technique 1. After analysing all the mistakes, I concluded that most were local, indicating that the students could convey meanings without difficulty, but needed help in the production of accurate texts. Most of the mistakes were successfully corrected when the students revised their work.

- The students reported that they were familiar with the correction technique I had used, which might explain their efficiency in correcting mistakes, and that they found it helpful. Despite the fact that most mistakes were successfully corrected, many students reported having some difficulty finding the correct forms.
- Some of the symbols used, such as *T* (wrong verb tense), *Sp* (wrong spelling) and *P* (wrong punctuation) were said to be more helpful than *Gr* (wrong grammar) and *V* (vocabulary), the symbols covering the broadest areas. There seemed to be a preference for greater guidance, perhaps due to the Brazilian school system where traditionally the teacher is solely responsible for the provision of correct answers, students never being expected to find them themselves.
- Students often asked for help when they received the feedback before trying to solve the problem themselves, arguing that they were unable to correct their mistakes, especially in the area of vocabulary. Most of them habitually look up words in bilingual dictionaries, do not check their usage in monolingual dictionaries and are surprised when a word is considered wrong.

Composition 2

Students wrote a biography of a famous person. I used error correction technique [2], with each symbol written next to the sentences where the mistake(s) occurred. Again, most mistakes were local errors. Only half the mistakes were successfully corrected when the compositions were re-written.

- Students reported that they were unfamiliar with this type of correction technique. Most also said that they had difficulty finding the mistakes.
- All students reported that there were mistakes which were very difficult to correct and half said that there were mistakes which they could not correct.
- Half the students said that the technique was very helpful; this may be because they were trying to give me the answer they thought I wanted.
- During interviews, several students once again pointed out that more general symbols, such as *Gr*, were not particularly helpful.
- Another point concerned the source of help when a mistake was difficult to correct. Students said they looked

at their coursebooks and grammar books, and asked friends. It seemed that they needed more help.

Needs or preferences?

Students stated their preference for detailed and guided feedback very emphatically in the interviews, yet half the questionnaires showed that they considered error correction technique [2] to be helpful. There seemed to be a conflict between preferences and needs. While in the interview they could have been reporting their *preferences*, since they were talking to me informally, in the questionnaires they might have been considering their *needs* and realised that not so much guidance is needed after all.

Despite the preferences stated during the interviews, I decided to proceed with technique [3], which provides less guidance, because half the mistakes in the compositions had been successfully corrected. I chose, therefore, to consider the students' needs, rather than their preferences.

Composition 3

Students wrote about the characteristics of their ideal job. I put a cross next to sentences where mistakes occurred. Only a few errors were successfully corrected when the compositions were re-written.

- Most students said they were not familiar with the 'search and correct' technique. The majority reported having had difficulties in spotting the mistakes and consequently a lot of difficulty correcting them.
- The questionnaire again suggested that most learners found the technique helpful, but that more guidance was needed.
- Students were emphatic during interviews that they needed more help with correction.

A new technique

Because the reactions to technique [3] were very negative, I decided to change my original plans. I allowed the students to do their corrections in class, with the help of their peers. I then tried a different technique which provided them with more guidance, and I abandoned self-correction, which would have meant no guidance at all.

Composition 4

Students wrote an appraisal of a book of their choice. This time, I wrote the

feedback in sentences, which indicated mistakes, were very supportive, and responded to form and content.


- The majority of students reported that their compositions had never been marked in this way before. The fact that most mistakes were corrected, however, rules out lack of familiarity as a possible cause for inability to correct mistakes. All students reported that there were no mistakes which they could not correct and most stated that there were no mistakes which were difficult to correct. Nevertheless, only one final version did not contain any errors.
- Students' reactions to the technique were very positive. They all stated that it was very useful and that it was very easy to find their mistakes and to correct them because they were helped.

Preferences and needs

Students tended to prefer techniques which provided more guidance in spotting and correcting the mistakes. However, if we examine their actual performance, we cannot categorically state that this is what they need. All the final versions contained fewer mistakes than the first drafts, regardless of the type of error correction technique used. Global errors were most successfully dealt with and not a single final version contained this type of mistake.



Although no definite conclusions can be reached, it seems to be worth raising students' awareness that there are mistakes which they can correct themselves, or even avoid, if they look at their work carefully.

Students not used to dealing with feedback other than provision of the correct answers, simply do not know what to do with all the comments on their compositions. They need training in handling feedback. The process of making students critical of their own work may be a long one but it is worth trying if we want them to become more independent. 



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