تصحيح القواعد في الكتابة المدرسية

[باللغة الانكليزية]

Correction of Grammar
in Writing Classes

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ملخص البحث

كلنا قام بكتابة بحوث او قطع انشائية في بعض الفصول الدراسية من اجل تصحيحها واعادتها من قبل اساتذتنا. وكلنا يعلم ايضا بان البحث او المقالة التي تعود وكلها خطوط حمراءو مملوءة بالملاحظات تكون مخيبة للامل بالنسبة لكاتبها.

الكتب المنهجية المخصصة لمهارات الكتابة بالنسبة لمتعلمي اللغة غير الاختصاص (لغة ثانوية) مملوءة بالارشادات التي تتعلق باسليب والفعاليات التي يجب ان تستخدم في داخل الصف الدراسي، لكن قلما تخبر هذه الكتب المدرسين عن الاشياء التي يجب ان لا يتعملوها. ان الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو مناقشة الاساليب المستخدمة والتي يجب تجنبها في تصحيح الكتابة وخاصة في مادة الانشاء.

فمعظم المدرسين يتفقون على اهمية التصحيح النحوي كجزء مهم في اي فصل دراسي. ويعتقدون ايضا بان الاخطاء النحوية ضرورية. هذا الاعتقاد هو الشائع والمالوف بين اساتذة اللغات، لكن عدد كبير من الباحثين اظهروا خطا هذا الاعتقاد السائد. هذا البحث يوضح سبب عدم ضرورة التصحيح النحوي ويحاول ايضا تقديم بعض المقترحات العملية على نوع التصحيح الذي يجب ان يتبع من قبل الاستاذ لطلابه فيما يتعلق بالتغذية المرتدة في مادة النحو.

لقد قامت الباحثة باجراء تجربة على طلبة الصف الاول من قسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية التربية جامعة كربلاء مستندة على دراسات سابقة وقد اظهرت النتائج عدم اهمية التصحيح النحوي في المراحل الاولى.

Introduction

We have all written papers for some courses to be checked and graded by our instructors. We know very well that a paper that is returned with red markings and notes all over is quite discouraging for the writer. Knowing this, while giving feedback we may of course use pink pens and put smiling faces here and there on the paper but still we see the light in the students' eye fading. If our aim is to win the student instead of discouraging him, we should be looking for ways of giving feedback without losing the student.

Second language writing textbooks for teachers are typically full of advice concerning techniques and activities to use in class, but they rarely tell teachers what things not to do. The purpose of this study is to argue that a widely used and very popular form of writing class correction feedback should be avoided.

Most ESL/EFL writing teachers would strongly agree with the statement that teacher correction feedback is a necessary part of any writing course. They also think that grammar correction is essential. This belief seems to be intuitively obvious and just plain common sense, but many researches conducted in the last 20 years have revealed it to be wrong. This paper aims to explain why grammar correction is not essential, and also attempts to offer some practical recommendations on the type of feedback writing should be giving by instructors to their students in place of grammar feedback.

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 to later eliminate these errors. Studies have shown these arguments to be incorrect.

The Value of Grammar Instruction

(Krashen,2004:2) claims that language acquisition does not happen when we learn and practice grammar rules. Language acquisition only happens when we understand messages. This has, of course, been questioned in recent years, as a stream of papers have appeared in the professional journals claiming that grammar instruction is helpful.

Truscott (1998:27)says only that even after substantial grammar study, even very motivated students show only modest gains in accuracy, and these gains occur only on measures that encourage a focus on form.

Some researchers have interpreted this position by saying that all grammar teaching is forbidden. In fact, it is not always true. There are two good reasons for including grammar in the EFL curriculum: The first is for "language appreciation," otherwise known as "linguistics." Linguistics includes language universals, language change, dialects, etc. The second is to fill gaps left by incomplete acquisition and places in which idiolects differ from the prestige dialect. Society's standards for accuracy, especially in writing, are 100%: We are not allowed "mistakes" in punctuation, spelling or grammar. One public error, in fact, can result in humiliation. Even well-read native speakers have gaps, places where their grammatical competence differs from accepted use.

Consciously learned rules can fill some of these gaps, which are typically in aspects of language that do not affect communication of messages. The place to use this knowledge is in the editing stage of the composing process, when appealing to conscious rules will not interefere with communication.

(Krashen, 2002,3) recommend delaying the teaching of these rules until more advanced levels in the university. He suggest firstly giving acquisition a chance, and then use conscious knowledge to fill in some of the gaps. There is no sense teaching rules for Monitoring that will eventually be acquired.

Grammar, thus, is not excluded. It is, however, no longer the star player but has only a supporting role.

rammar Correction in Second Language Writing Courses Does Not Work

Many studies have conducted to measure the effectiveness of different types of feedback on students writing abilities in their second language learning. In a famous study by Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986), four kinds of grammar corrections used on the surface errors in English language of Japanese students were compared to see if they had an influence on the students' writings over time. These types were: (a) explicit correction, where errors were pointed out and correct forms offered; (b) marking mistakes with a yellow pen, without explanation; (c) a tally was

kept in the margin of the number of errors per lines, and students were told to examine the line and find and correct the mistakes; (d) the use of a correction code which showed both the location and kind of errors. In all these cases, the students were told to write their essays again, making the necessary corrections. Results showed that at the end of the course, no significant differences existed between all the groups in terms of accuracy. Consequently, the authors concluded that comprehensive treatment and overt corrections of surface errors are probably not worth the trouble for teachers to make.

Additional studies have shown that neither the use of direct or indirect techniques in correcting student errors has an influence on writing ability results. Moreover, making full (every error is corrected by the teacher) or selective (only one type of error is marked at a time) grammatical corrections is also not effective. There is no evidence of a delayed effect to grammatical corrections, that is to say, an effect which later shows up. The kind of instruction used by teachers in the study did not appear to have an impact on the results. Nor was the lack of benefits of grammatical correction dependent upon the students' gender, age, proficiency level, or educational background. (Truscott's seminal article (1996), Krashen (2004a) and Loewen (1998). Interestingly, many of these results are also true of corrections made in first language writing classes).

John Truscott (1996:341) has noted: Veteran teachers know there is little connection between correction and learning: Often a student will repeat the same mistake over and over again, even after being corrected many times. When this occurs, it is tempting for the teacher to say the student is not attentive or lazy; however, the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, even with successful students, argues against any such explanation. Rather the teacher should conclude that correction simply is not effective.

The results of these studies should not be too surprising, for us. Fathman and Whalley (1990), Ashwell (2000), and Chandler (2003), have noted that subjects who were fairly advanced students of EFL who had had considerable instruction in formal grammar, and who, we can assume, believed in conscious learning. In a fourth, Gascoigne (2004), subjects were first year university students in the US studying French. In these studies, the students had the advantage of having the corrections in front of them and had plenty of time. Because the paper was already written, students did not have to think about meaning at all but could focus on form,

and they were graded on their grammatical accuracy. In these cases, correction was given the maximum chance to work, and the impact of correction was very modest.

Grammatical Correction in ESL/EFL Writing Classes Can Be Discouraging and Ineffective To Students' Performance and Development

Many studies have revealed that grammar correction to second language writing students 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 did, wrote more, and with more complexity, than those who did receive grammar corrections. Moreover, the time spent by students and teachers on correcting grammatical errors causes needed attention to be sidetracked from other important elements of writing, like organization and logical development of content.

Writing Class Grammar Feedback Doesn't Work

The first reason why writing class grammar feedback doesn't work is that it treats only the surface appearance of grammar and not with the way language develops (Truscott 1996:203). 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 of 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 comments and students understanding of these comments. Research has shown that corrections

made by second language writing teachers are frequently arbitrary, not consistent, and greatly dependent upon the age and amount of time the teacher has with L2 students. According to Zamel (1995), teachers also commonly misread student 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, regularly do not incorporate these corrections into their work (Cohen ,1987: 82).

The Test

The subjects used in this study were first year university students in Kerbala University, College of Education, English Department, for the studying year 2006-2007. They had had considerable instruction in formal grammar.

Adapting Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986), the researcher used forty students of the first year as a sample of his study. They were arbitrarily divided to four groups and four kinds of grammar corrections used on the surface errors of these students which were compared to see if they had an influence on the students' writings over time. These types were: (a) explicit correction, where errors were pointed out and correct forms offered; (b) marking mistakes with a yellow pen, without explanation; (c) a tally was kept in the margin of the number of errors per lines, and students were told to examine the line and find and correct the mistakes; (d) the use of a correction code which showed both the location and kind of errors. In all these cases, the students were told to write their essays again, making the necessary corrections.

One group received correction only, the other correction plus feedback on content. Correction was limited to grammar, and consisted solely of underlining all grammar errors (e.g. verb forms, tenses, articles, agreement). Thus students were told the location of their errors only and were not given information on the kinds of errors or shown the correct forms. Students wrote their compositions in class (they were given 30 minutes), the corrected versions were returned a few days later and students were given 30 minutes to rewrite and that was repeated for fifteen times during the first and second semester.

The study continued for one studying year. The study represents the most optimal conditions for correction to work: All students were university-level and were able to understand grammar. All were motivated to do well, in some cases grades were at stake. All had plenty of time, from 30 minutes to make corrections and all had access to their grammar texts. All they were asked to do was rewrite their own corrected essay.

Results showed that at the end of the year, no significant differences existed between all the groups in terms of accuracy. When they write new compositions and face same problems in writing their sentences, they try to eliminate sentences when unsure about the grammar. Such sentences would be eliminated even when the idea was important to communicate meaning. Consequently, the researcher concluded that comprehensive treatment and overt corrections of surface errors are probably not worth the trouble for teachers to make.

Conclusions

The most effective solution would be for writing instructors is 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 (especially overseas) is based on the value of grammar correction and if a teacher did not employ it, they would be considered as unprofessional.

One possible solution to this problem which I have found to be useful, through my teaching college composition for five years , is to give periodic short grammatical lessons at the beginning of class (the week after a big homework assignment), and I discuss one or two widespread grammatical problem (e.g. articles, prepositions) that I encountered in the students' homework. This usually has gone over well and generally satisfied the students need for grammatical correction feedback.

But just because grammar feedback is problematic does not mean all feedback is ineffective. The general problem with is with the focus of second language teacher's feedback. Studies indicate that writing teachers spend most of their busy time offering grammatical corrections in their

comments. In other words, they commonly view their students' work as language instead of writing teachers, concentrating primarily on form over content. As a consequence, they address only one part of the writing process. What writing teachers need to do is give priority to MEANING and MEANING RELATED problems, to make remarks about students' texts instead of just form. Semke (1984) has demonstrated that students who received comments from teachers only on content did much better and spent more time working on their essays than those who received criticism only on grammar.

Specifically, this means that teachers should devote their time to areas like:

1. Organization by using logical development of ideas and arguments in addition of using effectiveness of introduction and conclusion.
2. Content through the use of description, thesis statement, focus, use of facts and experience, cogency and consistency of how and why explanations

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.

Other important aspect while giving feedback is adopting a positive attitude to student writing. If the student receives only negative feedback, he may easily be discouraged from trying to form complex structures and using new vocabulary. However, feedback sessions can be a beneficial experience for the student if the teacher shows the strong points as well.

Another important point to consider while giving feedback 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
- 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 and the student would be discouraged. One alternative can be giving feedback through 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.

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 (Krashen 2004:29).

Teaching writing can be a very taxing and time-consuming process. Minimizing grammatical error feedback has the advantage of greatly simplifying teachers jobs, giving them needed time to spend on concentrating on other important elements of the writing process, while also removing a significant impediment to their students learning how to effectively write.

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