Color-coded Marking: Using Vibrant Feedback to Enhance ELL Engagement

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Abstract
Social science research suggests that using a red pen for essay marking evokes a negative student response. Beyond the choice of marking color, ELL students are often overwhelmed by the assorted scribbles, circles and slashes that teachers apply to the written essay in an effort to illuminate and correct syntactic and semantic errors. The use of a color-coded marking matrix allows teachers to easily indicate the problem areas while prompting students to interact with their text on a visual level to make recommended corrections independently. The matrix is a discrete set of grammatical and lexical elements; each assigned its own color. By highlighting the mistake, either manually or electronically, the teacher is able to give the student a visual depiction of areas of writing weakness. Simply correcting the student error does not ensure that future mistakes of the same kind will not occur. At a glance, a student can assess her writing weaknesses by color prevalence and can actually track her progress in subsequent writing activities by comparison. In addition to the color-coded writing elements in the matrix, students can use corresponding columns for translations as well as hints for remediating the particular error. Teachers and students agree upon the colors that denote the elements, and the matrix legend is co-created by the class for the term. Rather than marking being seen as the endpoint of a learning experience, color-coded marking introduces student empowerment and self-correction for maximum engagement and retention.

Keywords: writing process, English Language Learners, marking systems, engagement

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Introduction

Before engaging in discussion of the means and modes of the marking of writing and its correlation to teaching the skill, it may be beneficial to consider the function of writing in the instructional process, as well as to connect the use of marking to relevant learning theory.

Writing: The Swiss Army Knife of Instructional Tools

Within the English language classroom, indeed within the broader context of learning, there is often the confusion between understanding and familiarity. While neurocognitive processes drive familiarity, recollection and understanding are phenomenologically distinct expressions of explicit memory as their retrieval is accompanied by pertinent associative detail (Paller, Voss & Boehm, 2007). If a group of adults were asked to raise their hand if they know what *existentialism* is, a fair number of the educated participants might do so. However, when given a small slip of paper and asked to write the definition of *existentialism*, the former certainty may erode when presented with the task of capturing one's understanding in words.

Such is often the case with both L1 and L2 English learners. Class content, leisure reading, social media and the cinema expose the learner to an array of words and sentence constructions, which without acquisition and sustained use, are retained comfortably under the heading of "familiar." Putting these familiars under the heading of "knowing" requires their ownership, use, and manipulation in a variety of settings. Writing is one such mechanism for evaluating comprehension and assisting the learner in distinguishing between what I know and what I am simply familiar with. Additionally, the emergence of writing across the curriculum has gained appeal in recent years as it provides these benefits regardless of content area and supports the development of such 21st Century Skills as critical reflection.

Writing for the English language learner (ELL) represents a constellation of inter-related masteries in the language classroom. Aside from the syntactic, lexical and semantic issues that must be dealt with, some learners must simultaneously balance these features within a new alphabet of characters, as is the case with my Arabic-speaking students. Therefore the form, or physical aspect of writing in perhaps a new direction with new letters and symbols, often takes precedence over attention to content. Even so, the utility of writing bears the same vital function in that it provides an avenue for learners to demonstrate understanding, reveal weaknesses and display creativity. It is a likewise a peephole through which teachers can individually access these student competencies and align subsequent instruction.

Learning Theories about Marking?

Although marking generally signals an endpoint in leaning as it articulates the summative outcome of instruction, the form that marking takes can transform the activity into a starting point for unlearning and re-learning. Formative assessment, or teacher feedback in general, is considered a powerful influence on student achievement and by extension, engagement (Atherton, 2011). The form that marking takes may adhere more closely with some learning theories than with others, thereby changing the nature of the learning experience for both the student and the teacher.

The teacher wielding the iconic red pen and identifying student writing mistakes with a confusing assortment of scribbles, lines and corrections falls more in line with somewhat outdated learning theories. This manner of marking tends to be more behaviorist in perspective in that the ultimate aim is performance improvement by arranging the environment to produce desired results in achievement (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). A closer look at traditional forms of marking indicates that surface-level manipulation lacks the student participation element that is critical to engagement and authentic learning.

Although the use of color in teaching and learning has enjoyed favorable appeal, there is research that suggests that the color red used in marking has negative connotations for students (Dukes & Albanesi, 2013), Simply pointing out mistakes, in any color or format, communicates not only the finality of the teacher's judgment, but also does nothing to guarantee the error will not be repeated in subsequent writing attempts.

Solution-based learning and collaborative work between students, and between student and teacher, all features of the constructivist learning theory, offer some insulation against inadvertently excluding the learner from the learning process. Transforming the writing process into more of a volley between teacher and student wherein teacher feedback invites a response and ultimately a change, moves the student from the position of receiving knowledge to discovering knowledge. Herein may lie our best prospects for authentic learning and retention.

Facilitating Discovery for English Language Learners

As we consider the complexity of elements that L2 students must juggle within the writing process, it is unlikely that more written feedback or even simple circles and slashes applied to their attempts will point them toward discovery. Perhaps a non-linguistic medium for identifying errors would be productive. However if this mechanism is designed and employed only by the teacher without student input, then there is less likelihood of engagement, let alone improvement as a result of it.

There are any number of marking systems and frameworks available to teachers. Some, such as essay marking software and other computer-assisted programs offer the type of objectivity, consistency and timeliness that is viewed as desirable to teachers and students alike (Shermis, Burstein, Higgins, & Zechner, 2010; Page & Petersen, 1995; Ajay, Tillett, & Page, 1973).

In many ways, these programs expedite the marking process and reduce the time between output and outcome for the student. Unfortunately, not only does the student have limited, if any, interaction with the design of the tool, neither does the teacher except for selecting from a preset menu of criteria. In some ways, excluding the student from this aspect of the learning outcome process may have more damaging effects then excluding the teacher.

In the differentiated learning environment, those time-honored virtues of objectivity and consistency lose some of their appeal as the one-size-fits-all approach lacks sufficient customization to be beneficial to all learners. Therefore a marking framework that is rigid enough to be considered equitable, is often not flexible enough to accommodate the range of learning differences, styles and preferences that today's classroom now recognizes and must accommodate. Likewise, when students co-create the marking matrix based on teacher-guided competencies, there is a participatory aspect to both the process of writing, as well as an investment in the marking.

The Color-Coded Marking Matrix

Several years ago when I began teaching English internationally, I found that some of the tools in my TESOL toolbox that had worked sufficiently in the ELL classroom in the US, were no longer adequate. As I considered this new challenge and how I might better configure my practice in a way that was both engaging, effective and enjoyable for the student, the color-coded matrix was born (Fig. 1). Unlike in the US, where speakers of other languages were submerged in the target language environment, my ELL students had a different challenge. As in my current setting, they are learning English in an Arabic-rich environment, much like English speaking students would learn Japanese or French in the US.

Figure 1: Example of a color-coded grammatical matrix.

Writing Element	Translation	HINT or RULE	Student Notes Or examples
Spelling or Word Choice	التهجئة الصحيحة للكلمات	Check the dictionary or type the word into an online search engine like Google.	
Verb Agreement or Tense	زمن الفعل صحيح	Circle the subject of the sentence and underline the verb. http://www.grammarbook.com/grammar/cnt_gram.asp	
Punctuation	علامات الترقيم	Ask: Does your sentence end in a full stop? Does your question end in a question mark? Does your exclamation end in an exclamation point?	She runs fast. Do you like to run? No! I hate exercise!
Capitalization	استخدام الحرف الكبير بداية الجملة وللأسماء	If the word occurs at the beginning of the sentence or is a proper noun (the name of a specific person, place or thing), it should begin with a capital letter.	Princess Haya Dubai Ferrari

Implications for All Learners

Therefore if we assume that experience is the most salient factor in advancing a learner through the stages of skill acquisition, then the remaining dilemma is what is done with this knowledge, both in terms of storage and appropriate access. Charlin, Boshuizen, Custers and Feltovich (2007) introduce an interesting notion that repeated experiences can construct schemas that can be later activated when a similar pattern of elements is detected.

Although discussed exclusively in a medical context, the notion of scripts might be applicable to other real world environments. Students engaged in problem-based learning might benefit from being taught these configurations to speed up the retrieval of possible solutions. I see this as a mechanism for categorizing and storing prior knowledge. Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DePietro and Norman (2010) assert that students have not yet developed the necessary networks to connect and organize concepts and procedures in their learning domain, as experts typically have.

Therefore the researchers posit that it is the organization of their knowledge that influences how they learn and apply what they know (Ambrose et al. 2010). In fact, they argue that a chief objective for the instructor is to teach students how to organize, as well as how to discern and mediate inaccurate or inappropriate prior knowledge, as it has been shown to hinder learning (Ambrose et al. 2010).

Frameworks such as the color-coded matrix can provide both an organizational schema for writing improvement as well as a participatory activity for ownership of learning as expressed through the written medium in all language learning environments.

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