

The Design and Outcomes of a Writing Improvement Programme in an Australian University

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Introduction

This paper examines a writing development programme implemented in a School of Nursing and Midwifery. It was targeted at English as an Additional Language (EAL) doctoral writers who had an intermediate to advanced level of written English. This writing programme was created to address a complex problem found among postgraduate students. Supervisors found it difficult to understand the writing of their EAL doctoral students, and cited poor or incomprehensible English as the problem. The doctoral students reported that they had difficulty with writing, but were disappointed with the feedback from supervisors who they felt primarily concentrated on their English skills and not their ideas (students did not see how their English writing impeded comprehension). Postgraduate students also reported that they were unable to improve their writing by themselves.

Drawing upon the anecdotal evidence, and an analysis of the postgraduate students' writing, a number of conclusions were made. The first conclusion was that students had many English language errors in their writing and therefore they were unable to clearly state their ideas for the supervisor to provide feedback (note that this relates purely to errors, not stylistic or discourse features of writing). The second conclusion was that these students could not see the errors they made, or if they were aware of the errors they did not know how to fix them. Students reported that they sensed something was not quite right but did not have the skills to analyse their writing, or that they did not know where to find the educational resources to help them fix the problem. It was also recognised that academic supervisors are not language teachers and have varying ability and time to provide useful language-focussed feedback (their predominant focus is on the content) (Ferris, 2009). This made supervisors feel powerless and discouraged. The task, it was concluded, was to reduce the number of errors made in writing, and this would alleviate the problem. An even better result would be to extinguish some error types altogether. A teaching programme needed to be devised that achieved these aims, plus some more, as will be discussed next.

Deciding on a programme of change

When faced with a piece of EAL writing that has a wide variety of errors in it, Ferris (2009) suggests that there are a number of questions that need to be asked before action can be taken:

1. What level of ability does the student already have?
2. What aspects of the writing are functional, i.e. does not need attention?
3. What aspects of the writing need development, i.e. subsets of grammar and/or stylistic features?
4. What is the desired aim once improvements have been made, i.e. needs analysis?
5. How sustainable is the solution?

In response to these questions, it was decided that the focus of the writing development programme would be on grammar and error correction, rather than on issues of stylistics and genre improvement.

The decision about which particular error categories to incorporate into the writing programme was informed by a review of the literature (e.g. Ferris 2009; Bitchener & Ferris 2012). The review helped establish which grammatical features commonly needed attention in tertiary-level writing. These were matched to the analysis of postgraduate student writing we conducted before the writing programme commenced and 11 error categories were identified (Table 1).

Table 1. Error categories used for the programme.

Code	Error Category	Examples
v	verbs (form/tense)	wrong verb or missing the verb, e.g. ‘now it changed’
n	nouns	e.g. ‘ability’, ‘car’, ‘advice’, every ‘day’, etc.
adj	adjectives	e.g. ‘everyday’, ‘painful’, ‘expensive’, etc.
adv	adverbs	e.g. ‘quite’, ‘soon’, ‘however’, etc.
prep	prepositions	e.g. ‘in’, ‘at’, ‘on’, ‘for’, ‘with’, ‘by’, ‘to’, etc.
art	articles	e.g. ‘the’, ‘a’, ‘an’, Ø
pl	plurals	e.g. car/cars, staff/staff, etc.
conj	conjunctions	e.g. ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘nor’, ‘yet’, etc.
punc	punctuation	e.g. , . : ; ’ - etc.
s/v	subject-verb agreement	e.g. ‘a person has’, ‘people have’, etc.
sent	sentence fragment/run on	e.g. ‘Having looked at the problem.’

The EAL writers displayed a range of errors across a spectrum, i.e. there was rarely full mastery over an area of English grammar and writing. Since there was no obvious single concentrated area of error, a general coverage of all observed errors was adopted. It was acknowledged that error categories are often related to each other, i.e. when dealing with nouns, plurals and articles can be addressed, or when dealing with verbs, subject-verb agreement and the basic subject-verb-object sentence form can be addressed. As a result, one error category (and its related categories) would be discussed each week. It is likely that only one area of error can be remediated at any particular time because students have a limited amount of cognitive capacity to process information (pay attention). Furthermore, it was felt that if error categories could be extinguished (remediated), this would not only reduce the overall number of errors but also the chance of them returning in future writing.

Students would be taught how to conduct a systematic search for error types. This systematic approach to reducing errors in writing is supported by prior research which indicates the effectiveness of focusing on one error category at a time, especially for discrete rule-based errors (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012, pp. 57-61). Furthermore, “for advanced L2 writers, it is clear that one treatment on one error category can help them improve the accuracy of their writing” (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010, p. 215). To complement this approach, explicit instruction was adopted for explaining error types. Error correction instruction is largely a linear process where a new form is introduced and practiced, accompanied by feedback. In this situation, improvement should be linear as the rule-based learning becomes internalised or automatized. Factors such as inattention will still influence the production of errors. It is likely that as a system of knowledge is developed, some areas within that domain will temporarily be destabilised to incorporate the new knowledge. Thus, if one error category is remediated, it may have a knock-on effect of causing a re-evaluation of related error categories, i.e. an extended knowledge about the different types of noun may cause a temporary (even negative) change in article use while the understanding and treatment of nouns is reconfigured. It was also decided that a peer-based element would also be used in order to increase the sustainability of improvement. After learning the methods and strategies for writing, students were expected to take the initiative to

look at each other's writing and seek help from each other. This would also reduce their dependence on their supervisor for English language help. Granted, a peer is unlikely to find 100% of the errors in another student's work, but they would be able to reduce the overall number of errors and increase the chance of producing a more comprehensible text. It is often the case that students have different areas of difficulty, so peer-based editing may increase the likelihood of error reduction (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ferris, 2011).

Intervention Programme

The programme was conducted in two hour blocks over eight weeks. It comprised of focused grammar/error instruction and short practice sessions in the first hour and focused indirect error feedback by peers on a thesis chapter draft in the second hour. Although we assumed that students had prior knowledge of grammatical forms, the focused grammar instruction brought any discrepancies and shortfalls in knowledge to light (in which case students were shown how to find resources to help themselves when this occurred). The topics in the programme were sequenced as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Weekly programme.

Week	Topics
Week 1	Introduction to the underlining and coding method for corrective feedback. The topic was the sentence and its variations, including clauses and phrases, how to identify the basic constituents of the sentence, and relationship of punctuation to this.
Week 2	Verbs, including tenses, verb phrases, and their role in independent clauses.
Week 3	Articles and nouns, their use in noun phrases, and how they act as the subject or object in sentences.
Week 4	Prepositions, phrasal verbs, and prepositional phrases.
Week 5	Phrases and clauses, including more practice on verb, noun, and preposition phrases.
Week 6	Combining phrases and clauses to create different sentence types.
Week 7	Consolidation 1: supervised practice at correcting one error category at a time.
Week 8	Consolidation 2: supervised practice at correcting one error category at a time.

In the first hour of each weekly lesson, the typical lesson format was:

1. Introduction about the problem area, including where the related errors occur and providing contextual information about why this is an issue.
2. Provide explicit instruction about the error category, properties and rules of the target form, and its relationship to meaning, and show examples.
3. Identify resources that help students understand the error category, the grammatical and stylistic rules, and practical lists etc. Teach students strategies about how and where to find help.
4. Provide explicit instruction on how the error category might be related to other error categories (as part of the exploration of the issue).

5. Conduct a structured input activity requiring students to manipulate materials and process the target form. This required a worksheet to be created prior to class (and some direct correction may be needed of student output).
6. Conduct a structured input and output activity asking students produce their own sentences, concentrating on avoiding that error type (i.e. ask students to produce a sentence from a series of phrases or notes given to them, or to create a written answer to a question).
7. Ask students to swap their written work with other students and underline where any instance of that error category has been made (thus providing indirect correction), and this is checked by the teacher for direct correction.

Each focused instruction session was immediately followed by an hour-long hands-on workshop for focused indirect written corrective feedback which was conducted by peers in pairs.

In the second hour, peers worked in pairs and examined each other's writing for the focal error category. The format was as follows:

1. Students swap a piece of their writing (e.g. a page from a draft of their chapter), identify the focal error category in their peer's work, and offer a possible correction (only if they could explain why). Since one error category may overlap with another error category, some discussion of this relationship naturally emerges, but the focus needs to remain on the primary error category.
2. The teacher answers queries. This is where a discussion of the relationship between different error categories often arose, and was worthy of discussion without losing focus on the primary error category.
3. The teacher checks the corrections as appropriate.

These workshops used focused corrective feedback because they emphasised that particular week's error category/focus ahead of other errors. Students were encouraged to provide a metalinguistic explanation of errors found to each other. Often, these peers attempted to provide some direct correction too. By responding to input and processing the writing of others – using codes to help them focus – students were required to notice and understand the feedback. This supported learning because students had to internalise and consolidate new knowledge within their existing linguistic repertoire.

Outcomes

In order to ascertain the effect of the writing programme, seven doctoral students wrote an essay before and after the programme and these were analysed for errors and error categories. This was compared to eight doctoral students who did not do the programme (but were free to seek help in other areas of the university) but had their essays analysed too. The assumptions underlying this study were that students would improve, but it was unlikely that they would produce completely error-free writing, and it was hoped that there would be an extinction of some error categories.

In terms of error rates, the students who did the programme reduced the number of errors they made by an average of 44% (ranged from -12% to +73% improvement). There was quite some variation in individual improvement, and all but one student improved. The student who benefitted least from the programme was clearly a level below the others in terms of English ability (i.e. intermediate versus upper-intermediate/advanced). Thus, the writing programme was effective in achieving its

aim at reducing the error rate, but with the caution that these results can only be expected among upper-intermediate/advanced English users. In comparison, the students who did not do this particular writing programme also improved by 12% (ranged between -51% to +63% improvement). These people may have been seeking help from other parts of the university, and this remains unknown. Among this group, there was no clear pattern for how individuals improved or worsened. The analysis for error categories provides more information about this trend.

In terms of error categories and their extinction, there was an average reduction of 2.7 error categories among those who did the writing programme (range from 1-5 extinguished). Large improvements were seen in the error categories of verbs, prepositions, articles, and punctuation. In the group that didn't do this particular writing programme, they worsened on average by 0.5 of an error category, which means they displayed a greater range of errors into the second essay (range of -3 to +2). At best, only modest improvements were found in verbs, prepositions, and punctuation. There were also group differences in how error categories disappeared or were introduced. In the writing programme group, when a new error category appeared, it was only once in the essay, so it could be a lapse of attention. In the other group, when a new category appeared, it was often found in multiple places in the essay, which indicates an incomplete level of knowledge or a lack of control over the error type.

Conclusion

The writing programme did seem to achieve its aim of reducing the overall number of errors made and in reducing the error categories. The literature indicates that concentrating on one error category (and related categories for that position in the sentence) is likely to improve writing, and students who used this systematic approach to detecting and correcting errors had much lower error rates as a result. The reduction in error categories indicate that a greater mastery over errors was also gained. This method of improving writing was readily learned and easily applied in peer-based scenarios – the participating doctoral students saw the value of working with each other to reduce overall errors. Some anecdotal feedback from supervisors indicated that they saw some improvement in the readability of their students' writing, but naturally they would prefer to see greater gains. However, this is something that can only be achieved over time, and the doctoral students will need to continue practising this systematic approach in order to produce increasingly better writing. Hopefully, in return, they will receive better feedback on their ideas and find the road to completing their doctoral studies becomes easier.

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