

The Integration of Error Correction Codes in Five Introductory Writing Classes

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Abstract

Effective teacher feedback on second language writing cannot begin and end with surface error correction. However, many students equate ‘good’ writing with error free writing and see any attempt on their part to fix their errors as a way, and at times the only way, to improve their writing. Hence, instructors and students often hold contrasting opinions about improvement in the context of the second language writing classroom. This educator’s reflection focuses on students’ use of error correction feedback across five sections of an introductory writing class taught in Spring 2023. There is a brief discussion surrounding error correction, but the primary focus is on students’ performance in three assessments in which error correction codes were a component. The findings show that there was a retention and application of some concepts, evidenced on the writing portion of the final exam. However, when judged independently, students struggle to identify and fix errors using codes. Error correction can therefore only be truly assessed and deemed effective when looked at in conjunction with other modes of corrective feedback as students engage in the writing process.

Keywords: Writing, Error Correction, Feedback, Assessment

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Introduction

One of the primary goals of any L2 writing instructor is to help students produce comprehensible texts, and one of the ways they do this is by providing corrective feedback. As numerous studies (Boggs, 2019; Hadiyanto, 2019; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998) have shown, learners do benefit from this kind of feedback as it can help improve their writing skills. Feedback can take the form of detailed narrative comments, individual conferences, peer review, or error codes. The latter involves not only identifying where the error has occurred and the type of error, but also examples of how to fix each error. This is seen as a viable option since it is less time-consuming in comparison to more detailed written feedback. Error codes are also useful as they allow students to work on fixing their errors independently. This is in contrast to direct or explicit feedback where students provide the correct linguistic form or structure.

According to Hyland (1990), one of the principal benefits of error correction codes is that they help to reduce the visible indicators of errors on students' writing; think of the dreaded red ink pen. Instead, instructors merely point out the location and type of error. In tandem with this is Lee's (1997) observation that inaccuracies in students' writing often occur because they fail to detect errors. However, when provided with symbols and/or abbreviations indicating such errors, students' can make corrections and reduce inaccuracies. In addition, the use of codes can help to reinforce principles that may have been previously taught as students can now see their application to their writing.

Unsurprisingly, there are some noted limitations of using error correction codes. In his 2011 study, Corpuz noted that students did not know how to use the codes to correct their sentences. Other participants stated that the process was time consuming, especially if they had to look at multiple codes and then correct their sentences. One additional issue that I have encountered in my practice is that students are often unable to retain or apply the use of the error correction codes outside the context of a specific writing assessment. So while learners may make corrections on a revised draft, the same mistakes often reappear in subsequent written assessments, with students having forgot the codes, their meanings and/or applications in the process of improving their writing.

Methodology

In Spring 2023, the writer taught five sections of ENG 210, an introductory writing course taken by undergraduate students at the academy. The class met once a week for 2.5 hours, over the course of fifteen weeks. Average class sizes ranged from 13 to 30; during the Spring 2023 semester, a total of 103 students were enrolled across the five sections.

On the first day of class, the instructor spent some time discussing the four learning outcomes (LO) stated on the syllabus:

- LO1 Produce a variety of texts written with appropriate organization and content.
- LO2 Apply phases of the writing process in the creation of written texts.
- LO3 Present a coherent oral argument justifying written texts.
- LO4 Use sources appropriately with correct APA citation.

Students received a physical copy of the error correction codes during this initial session, with a digital copy also available on Moodle.

symbol	meaning	incorrect sentence	explanation	correct sentence
SV	subject-verb agreement	The student <u>work</u> hard. There <u>is</u> five employees.	Subjects and verbs must agree in number.	The student works hard. or The students work hard. There are five employees.
pl	singular/plural	The internet has a lot of informations. You can make new friend easily.	Certain nouns are uncountable. Other nouns need an indication of how many.	The internet has a lot of information. You can make a new friend easily. or You can make new friends easily.
sp	spelling	The <u>maneger</u> is a woman.	Manager is spelled incorrectly.	The manager is a woman.
A	article (a, an, the)	Diners expect <u>glass</u> of water when they first sit down at their table.	Glass should be preceded by the article a.	Diners expect a glass of water when they first sit down at their table.
~	add word(s)	A camel is an animal/lives in the desert.	A word is needed between animal and lives.	A camel is an animal that lives in the desert.
cap	capitalization	Some people love to drive land <u>Cruisers</u> .	Land Cruisers is a proper noun and needs a capital letter.	Some people love to drive Land Cruisers.
/	lower case	Earth is my home <u>Planet</u> ,	Planet does not need a capital.	Earth is my home planet.
VF	verb form	I <u>am live</u> in the hotel.	Am live is the wrong verb form	I live in the hotel. or I am living in the hotel.

Table 1: First page of error correction codes sheet used by students in Spring 2023
– ENG 210

symbol	meaning	incorrect sentence	explanation	correct sentence
VT	verb tense	I <u>see</u> my friend yesterday.	Yesterday indicates the past tense.	I saw my friend yesterday.
WF	word form	This book is <u>bored</u> .	Bored is an active adjective.	This book is boring.
WW/WC	wrong word or word choice	My professor <u>learns</u> me many new things.	Learns is a receiving verb.	My professor teaches me many new things.
RO	run-on sentence	Abdulla failed the exam <u>and</u> he is upset <u>he</u> went home <u>and</u> his father said he shouldn't worry.	Independent clauses need to be separated by commas and conjunctions or full stops.	Abdulla failed the exam, and he is upset. He went home and his father said he shouldn't worry.
CS	comma splice	Mohammed is tired, <u>he</u> went to sleep.	Complete thoughts should be separated into sentences or combined into a compound sentence.	Mohammed is tired. He went to sleep. or Mohammed is tired, so he went to sleep.
frag.	sentence fragment incomplete sentence	He was tired. <u>Because</u> he always went to bed at 3:00am.	Because cannot start a sentence without a dependent clause after it.	He was tired because he always went to bed at 3:00am. or Because he always went to bed at 3:00am, he was tired.
WO	word order	You haven't seen <u>yet</u> London.	Yet should come after London.	You haven't seen London yet.
???	confusing	I don't understand what you are trying to say.		

Table 2: Second page of error correction codes sheet used by students in Spring 2023
– ENG 210

I explained the meaning of each symbol/code, and students read the incorrect sentences, explanations and corrected sentences with additional clarification provided as needed. I advised them to bring the sheet with them each week, highlighting its importance. During the semester, LO2 and by extension the application of the error correction codes was assessed three times: Assessment 1, Assessment 2 and the Final Exam.

Results

Students' performance on LO2 varied greatly by assessment. Of the five sections of ENG 210, only two sections scored 70 and above on LO2 attainment for Assessment 1. Only one section scored 70 and above on LO2 attainment for Assessment 2, while none of the sections scored 70 and above on LO2 attainment for the final exam.

	Assessment 1	Assessment 2	Final Exam	Spring 2023 Average
Section A (n=23)	60.87	26.09	13.04	53.7
Section B (n=17)	94.12	82.35	41.18	69.6
Section C (n=23)	65.22	34.78	8.70	56.7
Section D (n=17)	82.35	58.82	23.53	64.7
Section E (n=23)	65.22	8.70	8.70	50.1

Table 3: LO2 attainment – 70% and above

All five classes performed best on Assessment 1. Students submitted two typed paragraphs after receiving feedback on in class, handwritten paragraphs. Each paragraph was a minimum of 150-175 words, so this was not a lengthy assessment. I released the assessment in Week 3 as per institutional policy, and students submitted their final drafts in Week 5, giving them two weeks to complete the assessment. Sections B and D scored well on LO2 attainment, greatly surpassing the 70% target. And although the other sections scored below 70%, it is still noteworthy that each class attained a score in the 60s.

On the other hand, only one class earned over 70% on LO2 attainment for Assessment 2, the opinion essay. Using one provided research article and an article of their own, students submitted a four-paragraph essay of a minimum of 600 words. However, this time they only received feedback on one body paragraph as well as feedback on their introduction OR conclusion. As with the first assessment, first drafts were written in class and final drafts were typed and submitted two weeks after the release date. Section B scored very well on LO2 attainment with 82.35% while on the other end of the spectrum, Section E failed to attain even 10%. As for the other three sections, two scored below 40% and Section D came close to 60%, but still fell short of the 70% target.

The final assessment of the semester was the final exam held in Week 16. Here, we see a marked difference across all sections, except Section E which scored the same for LO2 attainment on both Assessment 2 and the final exam. For the other four sections however, the performance on the final exam showed a steep decline in LO2 attainment scores; this was especially evident for Sections B, C and D. The final exam consisted of three sections; students wrote two opinion paragraphs in Section 1, completed two error correction exercises in Section 2 and responded to a question related to APA citation in Section 3.

Discussion

Based on the results in Table 3, students struggled most with LO2 attainment on the final exam. I believe that one of the primary reasons for this was the fact that the errors were not named but instead students merely had to correct the circled mistakes.

The hole department meets every Thursday afternoon for two hours. There is twelve people in our department. All the people in our department hard workers. Everyone comes in early and leaves late we are all overworked. Nobody ever complain about the amount of work there is do, but nobody works hard enough to please Sally our boss. Anybody has ever seen her smile. Nobody has ever heard her say anything complimentary to anyone. When Constance enters the room everybody stops talking. |

Figure 1: Question 4 on the Spring 2023 ENG 210 Final Exam

As seen in Figure 1 – one of the two questions of this nature on the exam – there are no abbreviations or symbols provided as on the error correction sheet. However, I am not sure if providing them with the symbols would have yielded different results. Unless the meaning of each error is known as well as the correct form, a student may have still scored poorly in this section of the exam.

A stronger argument can be made for the fact that on the final exam, LO2 attainment was only judged based on error correction. However, for both Assessment 1 and 2 completed during the semester, criteria such as improvement and similarity between drafts were also factored into LO2 attainment since this was a learning outcome related to the writing process. Since this was a timed exam, these criteria were not applicable, so students had no time to revise their work. And again, LO2 attainment on the final exam was only about error correction whereas during the semester, LO2 attainment focused on the writing process of which error correction was a single component.

The weighting of the error correction questions on the final exam also contributed to the lower scores. 40/100 points were attributed to this section of the exam; each corrected error was worth two points. If a student failed to score well in this part of the exam, it undoubtedly affected the final overall grade. It must be noted that this has since been amended, and the Fall 2023 final exam, which was recently administered, asked students to complete one error correction paragraph instead of two.

As for Assessment 2, a few factors contributed to the lower scores in LO2 attainment when compared to Assessment 1. Firstly, most students only made minor corrections on their final draft, even after they received both implicit and explicit feedback. Secondly, they did not seek extra help by visiting the Academic Support Center which was factored into their LO2 score for the opinion essay. And finally, many students scored lower in similarity in comparison to Assessment 1. In an attempt to earn the best grade, these students submitted final drafts that were completely different from their in class handwritten work, either in style, content or both. So while error correction was a crucial component of the writing process, it was not as previously stated, the only factor. Students who failed to engage in the overall writing process also failed to do well with LO2 attainment.

Conclusion

One of the principal findings of this reflective undertaking was that error correction is only a small part of process writing. More than one method to provide students with feedback must

always be considered in relation to second language writing. Students' failure to correct errors on the final exam was not indicative of a failure to self-edit or to incorporate what they had learned about the codes. This conclusion is supported by students' performance on LO1 – the learning outcome directly related to writing (grammar and mechanics, content, organization etc.) and specifically on the final exam.

	Final Exam LO1 attainment	Final exam LO2 attainment	Spring 2023 Average LO2	Spring 2023 Average LO1
Section A (n=23)	60.87	13.04	53.7	78.9
Section B (n=17)	70.59	41.18	69.6	79.2
Section C (n=23)	56.52	8.70	56.7	74.9
Section D (n=17)	58.82	23.53	64.7	79.8
Section E (n=23)	47.83	8.70	50.1	72.6

Table 4: – LO1 and LO2 attainment – 70 % and above

As seen in Table 4, all sections performed better on LO1 attainment in the final exam compared to LO2. Even more importantly, all sections earned above 70% on LO1 rewritten here:

LO1 Produce a variety of texts written with appropriate organization and content.

Therefore, while perhaps unable to distinguish between a comma splice and a fragment and while perhaps including both of these errors in their writing, students still produced comprehensible texts on the final exam, with no time for revising or editing. Given the tendency of some second language writers to memorize sentences or paragraphs before exams (Kabouha & Elyas, 2015), students produced texts that were for the most part coherent and cohesive. And in the final analysis, error correction codes were but one small cog in the writing wheel.

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