

## A Study of Peer Error Feedback

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**Abstract:** In the writing instruction in the EFL/ESL context, error correction is always something that baffles teachers. Literature review indicates that peer revision can be an alternative to teacher correction. But few study is done on how well students can perform the peer revision activity, and what is left for the teacher in the error correction. This study aims at the exploration of the answer to these two questions through a tentative experiment, with the result that students can correct most of the errors quite well except word choice, collocation and some other global errors.

**Key words:** writing instruction; error correction; peer revision

### 1. Problem

In the writing instruction of college non-English majors, feedback on errors in the students' composition is always something teachers feel troublesome because of the large population of students a teacher has to teach and the various errors or mistakes there are in students' compositions. On the other hand, even if a teacher is conscientious enough to correct all the mistakes, will it be a positive way to help students learn? Talks with teachers and students illustrate the answer is almost negative. Most students just look at the marks teachers give and ignore the error corrections at all. Worst of all, if a student's composition is full of red ink, he may be frustrated and his interest and confidence in leaning ma be destroyed. Thus, it is necessary for teachers to explore effective ways to facilitate students' learning from errors, and meanwhile help them be able to avoid the above-mentioned troubles.

### 2. Literature Review

A review of the literature on error feedback reveals two major study areas: teachers' correction (Hyland, 1990; Makino, 1993; Dheram, 1995; Perpignan, 2003) and peer editing (Keh, 1990; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Storch, 1998; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000). The former, however, is often criticized as being "unspecific, incomprehensible, contradictory, inconsistent, inaccurate, meaningless to the student, vague, over-general, abstract, formulaic and idiosyncratic" (Zamel, 1985, cited in Rollinson, 2005). Robb et al (ibid, cited in Dheram) found that detailed feedback on surface errors was not more accurate than less detailed feedback on their respondents' work. They also observed that "improvement was independent of type of feedback" (ibid: 93). Fathman and Whalley (1990, cited in Dheram) found that learners' grammatical competence only improved when they received specific feedback on their grammar. Perpignan (2003) draws the disconcerting conclusion that teachers' error feedback serves no useful purpose in the students' learning improvement because of the lack of understanding between teachers and students. The latter is becoming more and more popular nowadays as it "operates on a more informal level than teacher

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response, provides a change from the more one-way interaction between the teacher and student” (Rollinson, 2005), thus may encourage or motivate writers and promote their understanding of the feedback. Meanwhile it may save the teachers from “a tedious and unrewarding chore” (Hyland, 1990) and cause students not to “suffer death by the red pen” (Furieux, 1999). Of the peer revision study, Keh regards linguistic errors as “low order concerns” (1990) and suggests when should such feedback be given in the writing process. Mangelsdorf (1992) explores the question from the perspectives of student writers whether peer review is helpful to their learning, with the result that it not only helps improve the “high order concern” (Keh, 1990), such as ideas, organization, content etc., but also helps them correct and reduce mistakes. Storch (1998) conducts a classroom-based study to provide descriptive accounts of students’ engagement in a collaborative text reconstruction task which pushes learners not only to produce meaningful text but also pay attention to grammatical accuracy, with the purpose of investigating which type of grammatical items is of the students most concern, and finding how students use the reasoning to arrive at grammatical decisions. De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) adopt the theory of ZPD (zone of proximal development) and a microgenetic approach to observe the mechanisms by which strategies of revision take shape and develop in the interpsychological space created when 2 learners are working in their respective ZPDs, with the conclusion that it is a reciprocal process for both readers and writers. All these studies show peer revision is a beneficial learning process, but there is very little research about how well students can correct their errors cooperatively. This article is a tentative study aiming at finding to what extent students can correct their language errors in a collaborative team work, and what is the teacher’s role in the error correction.

### **3. Study Design**

The students in this project are the second-semester freshmen majoring in Information and Computer Science at Zhejiang University of Science and Technology. These students are heterogeneous in terms of their English level, with Chinese as their mother tongue. The teacher has more than ten years of teaching experience and is experienced in dealing with students’ various errors or mistakes. For college non-English-major students in China, there is no separate writing course, and writing is involved in the literacy course, which is a compulsory course and usually is comprised of four class hours per week in a semester. The procedures are as follows: (1) Students were assigned to write a composition with the title of “My Father” as homework (product writing). (2) Students’ writing homework was handed in after one week. (3) The teacher wrote down all the sentences with mistakes in the students’ writing and input them into the computer to collect the error corpus, and then printed and copied the corpus in order to distribute it to students for correction. (4) Students were divided into five groups of six, with each group having different level students in order to make the activity feasible and make it a positive learning process to each student. In addition each group recommended a chairman and secretary who assumed the roles of sponsoring the activity and writing down the correction respectively. (5) The error corpus was distributed to each group for their collaborative correction activity. (6) Each group was required to submit their copy of correction.

### **4. Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to describe how well students can perform the peer revision tasks, it is necessary to categorize the errors or mistakes. Researchers have different categorizations of errors, with some more detailed (Connors. R.J. & Lunford, A.A., 1988), and others more general (PAN, G.R. & WANG Z.Q., 2005). For the sake of statistics and analysis of correction rate, here in this study a general categorization was adopted, which classified all students’

errors collected in this study into ten types: (1) misspelling; (2) disagreement, including that of tense, gender, number and case; (3) wrong collocation, including that of subject-complement, a noun and its modifier, a verb and its object; (4) word choice/use error, inclusive of meaning confusion or usage of synonymy, ignorance of whether choosing a noun or an adjective as predicative or attributive, and the mechanical translation of Chinese into English without considering the context, e.g. always equating the word “also” with the Chinese “也”. (5) misuse of parts of speech; (6) misuse of adjective, including that of the grammatical function, the wrong form of its comparison and superlative; (7) misuse of verb, involving confusion of different kinds of verb, such as intransitive, transitive, and auxiliary verbs, and wordiness, e.g. Whenever I *call a phone to* them...; (8) past tense(pt.) or past participle(pp.) form of verbs; (9) misuse of singular or plural nouns; (10) wrong structures or expressions, including the sequence of sentence structure, incorrect phrases or expressions. By analysis and statistics, the following data were obtained:

**Table 1 Statistics of errors and each group’s error correction**

Categories	Total Points	Correction				
		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
disagreement	22	18	19	21	15	15
wrong structures or expressions	18	3	4	7	4	6
word choice/use	14	2	2	2	4	6
misuse of parts of speech	9	6	7	8	7	9
misuse of adjective	8	6	6	8	6	7
misspelling	7	6	6	6	5	6
misuse of verbs	5	2	2	3	3	5
wrong collocation	4	2	2	1	1	3
pt. or pp. form of verbs	4	2	3	1	4	3
misuse of singular or plural nouns	3	2	2	2	2	3

Table 1 shows that students can correct some of the errors quite well, for example, disagreement, misuse of parts of speech, misuse of adjective, misspelling, misuse of singular or plural nouns, but there do exist some of the errors that are generally beyond their ability of correction, such as the correction of wrong structures or expressions, and the wrong word choice, which all the five groups did quite poorly. This is understandable because error correction is related to and inhibited by students’ language proficiency. One of the difficulties students have in EFL writing is that they don’t know how to express the meaning they want to convey. In such cases, students usually borrow the structure of their native language, and use the words or expressions that are nothing but the literal translation of their mother tongue, which is usually inappropriate. Another common difficulty for EFL students is the confusion of the meaning of synonymy and its usage, or the ignorance of connotation of a word, as is found by Pan and Wang (ibid). Corder (1974, cited in HUANG bin) categorizes such errors as presystematic error, which the error-committer cannot make self-correction. The poor work done by the five groups in the project reveals that although there are students with relatively advanced English level in each group and they do can correct a few of this kind of errors, it is generally beyond their language proficiency. The table also shows that students have more or less difficulties in collocation, the past tense or past participle form of verbs, and even in the use of verbs. The main reason of the collocation errors is that students transfer the collocation from their mother tongue. In addition, the ignorance of different collocations of synonymies is also a main cause for this kind of errors. Such errors more or less exist in students’ metalanguage and are hard to avoid because they are mostly presystematic too. For college students, generally it’s not so difficult to write the correct form of a verb’s past tense or past participle, but problems do exist, as is shown in Table 1. The reason is that students sometimes use overgeneralized rules to build

word consciously or unconsciously (e.g. built → builded, studied → studied). For a lot of students, the use of the verbs is of some trouble in terms of the distinction of intransitive and transitive verbs, thus leading to the errors. These two errors may be presystematic error, or systematic one (ibid), which the student writer can explain, but tend not to be able to make self-correction. From the table one can see that for such errors, the ability of group correction varies, with some group performing very well while some quite poorly. But this is not necessarily the case because the follow-up interview with the students in poorly-achieved groups reveals that some failure of correction is caused by carelessness or distraction of mind. They might have performed better if they had been more engaged in the activity. The work performed best for almost all the groups is the correction of the so-called postsystematic error (ibid) such as agreement, spelling, and the plural forms of nouns, which the students commit, often out of carelessness, and may fail to correct out of the same reason. Such kind of error is often known as a mistake rather than an error. One strange phenomenon found in the analysis of the data is that groups with relatively higher language proficiency tend to omit such kind of mistake, especially in a sentence where there were other more global errors (Ellis, R., 2000).

### **5. Teaching Implication**

The students' English proficiency is different in a class, which can be perceived through the various errors students have made in their composition. In an EFL teaching context where the classroom population is becoming larger and larger, it's a good channel for a teacher to know his or her students' leaning through the errors or mistakes they make. So teachers should make record of these errors and analyze them to find the possible causes of them, and then decide on the proper way to enable students to learn from the errors. In the project of peer error feedback study, one can see that it's common for students to make the so-called mistakes, and that through peer revision activity such mistakes can be corrected generally, which can not only improve the students language proficiency, but also promote their sense of perfecting the language in writing. Thus teachers might as well ignore this kind of mistakes and leave the correction for their students. As for the systematic error, it can also be corrected through peer team work since the language proficiency of the students in a group varies. What one student cannot correct may be corrected by other students. In case any group encounter difficulties, teachers may intervene in by, say, direct participation in group work. This not only means the correction of errors, but also further activates the students ZPD, turning the process of error correction as a constructive learning process. As far as the presystematic error is concerned, it is advised that teachers correct them in an interactive way since the error is beyond students' language proficiency. This correction is necessary and may become an effective leaning means because the leaning is based on the communicative need.

### **6. Conclusion**

Apart from a handful of types of errors, which tend to be presystematic, students are able to correct most of the errors quite well through group activity. In the EFL teaching context, in which the load of college English teachers of non English majors is becoming heavier and heavier, and the work of teachers' error feedback is becoming a tedious chore and are becoming more and more ineffective, peer error feedback is an alternative way and an interesting learning process, through which students can learn with ease. But for the global errors which are out of the range of students' language proficiency, it is up to the teachers to give the feedback.

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