

Error Treatment in the ESL Classroom Context

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The paper examines two major treatment strategies commonly used by NS and NNS ESL teachers in the classroom context. The perspectives of the two methods known as “editing” and “consulting” will be discussed from the viewpoints of both NS and NNS ESL teachers in terms of (a) rationale, (b) priority given to specific types of errors, (c) error treatment procedures, (d) attitudinal feedback from learners, and (e) evaluation of learners’ writing performances. Practical suggestions are given as guidelines for ESL teachers to treat errors in students’ writing tasks effectively.

この論文は、NS及びNNS ESL講師が教室で授業を行うときに一般に使っている主な二つのエラー取り扱いのストラテジーについて考察する。そのことは「EDITING」及び「CONSULTING」である。これらについてNS及びNNS ESL講師がどう用いているかを以下の観点から論じる。

- イ. Rationale
- ロ. 特別なエラーの優先
- ハ. エラー取り扱いの手順
- ニ. 学習者からのフィードバック
- ホ. 学習者の作文の評価

なお、ESL講師が学習者の作文のエラーの取り扱いを効果的に行うためのガイドラインとなる実際的な提案を行う。

It has been widely recognized among ESL writing teachers that it is a difficult task to help learners handle errors in their work. To most teachers, the ultimate goal in teaching writing is self-correction, i.e., to assist learners to monitor themselves on problematic language points and to minimize flaws in grammar, structure and organization. In order to reach the goal of self-correction, language teachers use various methods, particularly “editing” and discussing with individual students or groups on target language points that should deserve students’ attention. The second method enables students to consult with the teacher about what kind of help they need most. Both methods can be used in the classroom context in that the editing method is treated as class explanation and the consulting method as individual or group discussion or consultation.

This paper will discuss the two methods by using data obtained from the study on error treatment strategies conducted in 1998 (Pholsward, 1998) and the follow-up study on the consulting method during 1998-2000. The study in 1998 investigated how native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) ESL writing teachers treat errors and thirty-two university writing teachers (10 NS and 22 NNS) provided information by means of a questionnaire and interview on error perception and error treatments in individual papers as well as in class. In particular, the researcher was allowed to do four classroom observations (1 NS and 3 NNS). The

findings on error treatments, especially in the classroom context will be the focus of this paper with regard to the editing and the consulting methods, followed by a modification of the latter (Pholsward, 2000) which will be exemplified and illustrated by students’ writing pieces. As for the paper’s content, the researcher will provide a brief background of correction research before discussing the perception of errors in terms of rationale and treatment priority by NS and NNS ESL teachers, their methods used in the classroom, learners’ feedback and their writing performance evaluation, followed by practical suggestions for effective error treatment.

Research Background on Error Treatment

As seen in the ESL literature in the seventies to the nineties, there have been quite a number of studies on teachers’ error treatments and problems encountered as reported in international language journals. These reports reveal three areas of investigation:

- a. effective correction methods used by teachers (e.g. Chaudron 1984, Robb, Ross and Shortreed 1985, Freedman 1987)
- b. self-correction (e.g., Beaven 1977, MacKay 1983, Zamel 1985)
- c. learners’ attitudes or reactions to teachers’ correction methods (e.g., Hahn 1986, Cohen 1987, Lang Jr and Evans 1987, Radecki and Swales 1988), to name but a few.

These studies point to ESL teachers' concern with how to help their students to cope well with errors in their writing performances.

Research on correction issues in Thailand also falls into three major areas similar to those reported in international publications. In particular, researchers who published their work tend to focus on the issue of self-correction and they expressed a mixed concern over the use of correction methods, along with related problems, opinions, and reactions to the used correction methods from both teachers and students. One particular study on self-correction by Jacobs (1987) calls our attention to Thai students at Chiangmai University who are reluctant to accept peer feedback for self-correction. A few other Thai researchers also investigated correction methods; problems concerned as well as teachers' and students' attitudes toward errors and error treatment (e.g., Chabtanom 1987, Sitajinpong 1990, Roengpraj 1991). Particularly, the issue of correction methods preferred by Thai university students was discussed in detail in Wongsotorn et al. (1993). From these studies, we can see that error treatment is still a challenge for ESL teachers to deal with their learners.

NS and NNS ESL Teachers' Rationale and Treatment Priority

In the 1998 study, thirty-two ESL teachers (10 NS with M=9 and F=1 + 22 NNS with M=2 and F=20) from

four universities: Chulalongkorn, Thammasat, Rangsit, and the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC), were asked about their error perception in terms of rationale and treatment priority with the use of three questions:

1. What are your general attitudes toward errors in student writing with regard to "learners" and "teachers"?
2. What types of errors have you encountered most often in student writing--lexical, grammatical or organizational?
3. Among the errors you have encountered, how do you approach them in priority and why?

The question tackling teachers' attitudes was to check their rationale in dealing with error treatment. Teachers may regard errors as part of the learning process (i.e. hypothesizing), insufficiency or lack of understanding of study points, or carelessness or inattentiveness on the part of learners, while others may perceive errors as their responsibility to pinpoint them to their students, or part of their evaluation process. The other two questions dealt with teachers' priority in error treatment, as determined by their rationale.

It is obvious that NS and NNS teachers appear to have a different focus in perception of errors as seen in their responses to question 1. The majority of NS teachers (7 of 10) assert that errors are part of the learning process and that learners should learn to cope

with their own errors in self-correction. In contrast, more than half of the Thai NNS teachers tend to view errors as teachers' responsibility in identifying errors for learners and correct them to make the latter understand, hopefully expecting their students not to repeat the same errors in the next writing tasks.

As for their treatment priority, most NS teachers (7 of 10) and NNS teachers (14 of 22) identified grammatical errors as most frequent ones in student work. However, most NS teachers (7 of 10) put organizational errors first in priority while their NNS counterparts (13 of 22) focus their primary treatment on grammatical errors.

Error Treatment Procedures

The NS and NNS subjects in the study were asked about the methods or procedures of treatment used with student papers and in the classroom context. The two questions were:

1. What methods do you use to treat errors in student papers? Please explain.
2. What methods (individual/pair/group/class) do you use in the classroom? Please explain.

From their responses, we can see relationship between their rationale and selected error treatment methods. As for NS teachers who perceived errors as part of the learning process and considered their role in assisting learners to cope with their own errors, they identified errors for students' rewriting (7 of 10)

for individual papers and whole-class explanation (9 of 10) correspondingly. On the contrary, most NNS subjects reported the use of editing in individual papers (19 of 22). Similar to their NS counterparts, they also turned to whole-class explanation (16 of 22) as an error treatment method for the classroom.

Error Treatment Procedures in the Classroom and Learners' Reactions

The subjects in the study identified the whole-class explanation as a method that can provide feedback or "consultation" for learners. They considered the classroom context as a forum that students can identify errors shown on handouts or transparencies and try editing errors themselves. In this particular context, students can consult the teachers for further clarification on any point in question.

It would be interesting to see how ESL teachers handle the editing or consulting methods in the classroom and how students react to the used methods. The researcher was given an opportunity to observe four classrooms (1 NS and 3 NNS) in four respects: (a) specific method used, (b) classroom management, (c) teacher-student interaction, and (d) their attitude or reaction to the error treatment procedure used in the classroom.

From these observations, it appeared that the teachers in a class size of 10-30 students were satisfied with

the class editing method in that common errors were analyzed and students were involved in identifying errors. As for classroom management, the class editing method required that the students' seating arrangement be in a lecture format (i.e., sitting in rows). Therefore the teacher-student interaction fell into questions from the teachers eliciting answers from their students. Even though the teachers asserted that the class editing method could encourage teacher-student interaction, it was evident that there was a low level of "consulting," for the students tended not to ask further questions and from four observations, none of the students discussed errors in the tone of consultation, as expected by the teachers.

Considering students' reaction to the class editing method, the researcher noted that most students were quite relaxed as they helped each other in a group's attempt to identify errors. They appeared to be aware of the fact that their teachers would not tolerate silence very long if they kept quiet. The teachers would suggest answers in guidance to students and if the students were still not responsive, the teachers would identify errors and edit them, followed by detailed explanations.

Evaluation of Learners' Writing Performance and the Modified Consulting Method

To writing teachers, self-correction represents an ultimate goal for them to find ways to equip learners

with various kinds of strategies. More often, NNS ESL teachers (11 of 22) have been discouraged by repeated errors shown in students' writing even though they tried detailed editing in individual papers. Their students seem to pay more attention to grades than edited errors. The NS teachers (7 of 10) preferred identifying errors for students' self correction but found out that their students cannot correct errors according to their given guidelines. Both NS and NNS teachers were not satisfied with students repeating errors identified and corrected earlier, and particularly with those copying their peers or from original texts.

It is important for teachers to help learners to evaluate their writing performances by identifying errors in the first place and subsequently tackle those identified errors on their own. Teachers need to make students become aware of errors as part of their learning process and focus. During 1998-2000, the researcher developed a modified consulting method which gradually shifted the responsibility of error identification and correction to learners. The students learned to evaluate their own work by setting specific language points for their attention and the teacher evaluated their writing accordingly.

The researcher has used the modified consulting method for three years (1998-2000). Like other ESL teachers, the researcher has found it very difficult to make learners aware of their errors and try to monitor

or minimize errors on their own. Taking errors as part of the learning process, learners should evaluate their own work and play an active role in correcting their own errors at the level of their proficiency. The researcher then put learning points as a pedagogic focus for learners in every writing task; for example, a specific task requires learners to attend to the use of particular tenses. The students can submit their work in hard copy or by electronic mail. They were asked to write about their own problems with errors and specify what kind of assistance they needed most from the teacher.

Using the modified consulting method, the researcher found out that once the learning points (not more than two per task) were identified for learners, they were encouraged to pay more attention to the content and try to monitor themselves. Detailed editing was cancelled, as the students would try to deal with specific requirement, such as the use of past tense in reporting an incident or a business visit, together with close attention to subject-verb agreement. In case of marking, the researcher would concentrate on the content first, followed by the specific learning points identified for the task. It should be noted that the students were more willing to communicate by electronic mail and the teacher provided consultation by commenting on the content and the language points, not by editing but by suggesting and illustrating different options on how to express target ideas or meanings. The students can also take part in evaluating

their work by negotiating for revision if they think that they should deserve a better grade for a particular piece of writing.

The examples shown below can help reflect how students pay more attention to the content or ideas while trying to keep the learning points in focus. Selected pieces are drawn from the unedited work of third- and fourth-year students in the two programs: B.Sc. in Computer Applications at Mahidol University and BA in English at the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC).

Example 1: Learning focus on the use of past tense and subject-verb agreement

B. SC. Student 1: “In the last vacation, I **am** so busy. Every day I came to Mahidol University because I had 2 weeks to finish the project in the Software Engineering class. Some day I had to work until drawn and went home for cleaning my teeth, taking a shower, dressing and came back to the University. I **work** until I **feel like dying**. This is my life. It very boring. I think I’m so tired and I should be relax when I finish this project. I’ve a lot of plan such as going to theater or going to shopping with my friend or may be go home and sleep for whole day. But I can’t because I have a lot of homework and project to finish in this semester. That’s our life.”

BA Student 1: “When I knew that I **have** a chance to join this workshop I was exciting. It was very lucky for me. All activities gave me more knowledge. Especially activities 1, I enjoyed it very much. I never **knew** before that there are the ways to give an idea in more polite words. First time when I saw the word “Diplomacy” I so confused, because I **don’t know** the meaning of it. This activity was very useful for me. Also it was related with my major. I can use it to do my report writing and do my homework in other subjects. Moreover, I can use it when I’m going to apply for a job. When I’m invited to interviewing, I can use diplomacy to answer the questions. Yesterday I had oral practice about reading subject, I wrote my draft by using diplomacy. Thank you for everyone who prepared this workshop and gave me a very good opportunity.”

Example 2: Learning focus on the use of present, past, present perfect tenses and subject-verb agreement

B. Sc. Student 2: “Dear Teacher: I have a little worry but I also have some upset. That upset is my study. Usually, I’m happy. Nothing **have** made me feel worry or upset. Then I got accepted here. I even feel very good. But when I am studying here, the studying **have** made me feel very worry. I’ve

received my three grades. My grades **were** not good and this term my marks **were** not good at all. I feel very upset and worry. I don’t know what to do now of what my grade will be. Because I am too lazy. In the final test I will try my best for a better grade and don’t want worry and get upset again. I will study more attentively than the past. I will destroy the bad’s feeling for myself and my parent.”

BA Student 2: “The story [Con Air] is about a man who **protect** his sales and his family but he killed a capman that why **go** to the fiction that all Con Air **begin**. Convict and former US Army Ranger Cameron Poe Nicolas Cage, who this day is scheduled for release, leaves a prison bus to board the ill-fated transfer flight. Cameron Poe awaits his fate and the fate of the rest of the convicts aboard the C-123. A maximum security prison bus is escorted out of San Quentin for the trip to the transport plane. Lawmen advance through the airplane junkyard at Lerner Airfield in Death Valley in a firefight with the convicts who hijacked the C-123. I learn that it sometimes bad happening to people, you should help them. But not try to be a hero, just do for anything you can.”

We can see from these examples that the students were not consistent in the way they made errors. They

could get the target learning points right or wrong in the same piece of writing. This indicates a good potential for self-correction. Here is an example response to B. Sc. Student 2 in the tone of consultation.

Example 3: Example Response by Email

Teacher: “Dear ...Name, I’ve already received your assignment and marked it as C+ (i.e., your ideas are okay and grammar quite functional). Please note that you can say (a) “The thing that upsets me ...,” (b) “Nothing has made me feel worried ...,” and (c) “I will try to get off bad feelings” I understand how you feel about your study and you have my sympathy for your worry. Don’t worry too much. You certainly need more time for adjustments in your program and I believe that if you work hard, you can get better results in some new courses. Keep on trying and don’t give up. Regards. Ruja”

To the researcher, teachers should feel free to respond to their students in a friendly manner while keeping but not overemphasizing the target learning points in their responses individually or in the classroom. This is not to make the latter feel overwhelmed with fear of errors to the extent of inhibiting them from expressing their ideas that count as the core of an individual’s writing piece.

Practical Suggestions on Error Treatment

The examples from students’ work reveal that once learners are willing to express their ideas, there will be many opportunities to practice how to minimize or monitor their own errors. The teacher should also be aware that in the learning process, learners will make errors on their way to mastery at different levels, and as a result it would be impossible to expect them to be error-free in their writing tasks. In encouraging learners to perform at their proficiency level, the teacher can adjust personal expectations on typical errors made by learners at different levels. From the researcher’s observation, the consulting method, if used with electronic mail, can facilitate marking and consulting on specific learning points and put less pressure on the students who will experience a greater sense of privacy and language control, and thus feel less inhibited to write more to their teacher.

Error treatment will remain a critical issue for all ESL teachers, especially in the Thai context in which the students expect their teachers to take an authoritative role in guiding or editing their work. However, NS and NNS ESL teachers have been well aware that continuous, detailed editing in students’ work does not yield much of a positive outcome. The editing method cannot effectively sensitize students to take responsibility for their own errors and thus make it difficult for the teacher to help them reach the ultimate goal of self-

correction. It is expected that with the class editing method preferred by both NS and NNS teachers in the classroom setting, the teachers can incorporate the modified consulting method into their error treatment. This is an option to help develop learners' awareness of specific types of errors that will lead to self-correction for better writing performance.

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