

# Treatment of errors in an EFL writing course

Fumiko Yoshimura

Tohoku Gakuin University

## Reference data:

Yoshimura, F. (2010). Treatment of errors in an EFL writing course. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2009 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

How can we lessen student errors and improve their writing performance without burdening ourselves too much? I conducted a literature review of the previous research in order to find promising methods for handling student errors and improving their writing skills effectively and implemented them in my English writing course. This paper introduces the writing course. Specifically, findings from Reading-Writing Connection research (e.g., Hirvela, 2004), the process approach (e.g., Leki, 1995), and collaborative learning (e.g., Bruffee, 1984; Liu & Hansen, 2002) were implemented in class activities and materials. Effects of the instruction were investigated by analyzing the students' writing samples and the survey results. Students' writing performance improved after a cycle of the instruction. In addition, a post-course survey reveals that students perceived various kinds of activities used in the writing course to be effective. Thus, students' writing skills can improve and their errors can be reduced to a certain extent without burdening the teacher too much.

この論文では、先生の介入を最小限にしながら学生の英文ライティング力をつけさせるためにこれまでの研究結果を応用した英文ライティングの授業を紹介する。具体的に言えば、読み書きの関係に関する研究 (e.g., Hirvela, 2004)、プロセス・アプローチ (e.g., Leki, 1995)、共同学習 (e.g., Bruffee, 1984; Liu & Hansen, 2002) の研究結果が応用された。この授業で使われた指導法で一度指導を受けた学生たちの英文の質は向上していた。また、授業後の調査からは、学生たちがこの英文ライティングの授業で使われたさまざまな指導法を有益と感じていることがわかった。このように、先生にあまり負担をかけずに学生の英文力をつけさせ、間違いを減らすことはある程度は可能なのである。

**ISN'T TREATMENT** of errors a daunting job? It consumes much time if we try to correct every single error students make. In addition, though previous research has shown positive effects of a writing teacher's corrective feedback in reducing students' errors, Truscott and Hsu (2008) argue that successful error reduction during revision does not guarantee subsequent learning. Another important consideration is that students' errors are not only language errors. To write a good paper, students need to pay attention to various aspects of their writing, such as appropriate content description, logical rhetorical organization, appropriate language choice, accurate usage of grammar and so on. Failing to handle these issues may result in an unsuccessful writing performance. Therefore, all these issues should be addressed to help learners improve their writing performance.



The research question I investigated in this study is how students' errors can be reduced and students' overall writing performance can be improved without burdening the teacher too much. In order to find out effective ways to handle students' errors and improve students' writing performance, I conducted a literature review and found some promising methods and approaches (e.g., Carrell & Conner, 1991; Greene, 1993; Haas & Flower, 1988; Hirvela, 2004; Leki, 1995; Liu & Hansen, 2002). Though these methods and approaches were found to be promising, some methods (e.g., Carrell & Conner, 1991; Greene, 1993; Haas & Flower, 1988) had never been investigated empirically. Therefore, these methods and approaches were implemented in class activities and materials, and the effects were examined by analyzing students' writing samples and the post-course survey results. The analyses show that students' writing performance improved even after a single cycle of the instruction and students perceived various kinds of activities used in the writing course to be effective.

### Literature review

A review of the history of L2 writing research suggests that L2 writing research has incorporated cognitive and social aspects of writing by investigating the relationship among different language skills (e.g., Hirvela, 2004; Weissberg, 2006), considering the limitation of the working memory capacity (e.g., Ransdell & Levy, 1996; VanPatten, 1990), and viewing writing as social construction (e.g., Bruffee, 1986).

Reading-Writing Connection (RWC) research (e.g., Hirvela, 2004; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991) suggests that reading and writing support each other, and thus many researchers argue that reading and writing should be taught together (e.g., Carson & Leki, 1993; Grabe, 2001; Hirvela, 2004). For example, reading supports writing through "meaningful input". Meaningful input is not only facts but how writers think through the problems

they are addressing (Bolch & Chi, 1995), and specific components that constitute writing, i.e. rhetorical patterns in target language writing, linguistic features of writing, and lexical and stylistic characteristics of writing (Hirvela, 2004, p.115). Some ways of reading practice have been proposed to promote the connection between reading and writing, i.e. rhetorical reading (Carrell & Conner, 1991), mining (Greene, 1993), and rhetorical reading strategies (Haas & Flower, 1988). In rhetorical reading, learners are first taught about typical rhetorical structures of texts in the target language, and then asked to use that knowledge in their own reading and writing. In mining, learners are expected not only to decode the text meaning but to engage in the text to "mine" valuable information for their own writing just like miners dig up valuable natural resources from the ground. In rhetorical reading strategies, learners are asked to look closely at the social context in which the writer produced his or her text and then to study the strategies adopted by the writer.

The process approach (e.g., Leki, 1995) makes it possible for learners to divide writing process into different stages and concentrate on one aspect of writing at each stage. Considering the limitation of the working memory capacity and the complexity of coordinating various knowledge and subskills in the act of writing, the process approach may well help writers by reducing the number of tasks accomplished simultaneously. Typically, it follows idea generation activities, outlining, writing a draft, rewriting the draft by focusing on the organization and meaning, and proofreading it by focusing on the language forms.

Proponents of collaborative learning (e.g., Bruffee, 1984) argue that learning is socially constructed and research in L1 and L2 writing (e.g., Liu & Hansen, 2002) has found various benefits of writing groups and peer evaluation activities. Bruffee (1984) states that by collaborating with their peers, learners may be able to complete a task that individual learners may not be able to complete on their own.

Thus, previous research has suggested effective ways of developing learners' writing skills. These research findings were implemented in the EFL writing course that will be introduced in the following section.

### Writing course

The writing course was offered in the school year of 2008. The goals of the course were to learn typical structures of English expository texts, the process of English writing, and how to integrate various knowledge and skills of English writing.

By implementing the previous research findings, the course used the following activities: 1) Students read various kinds of texts including model texts, their own drafts and their classmates' drafts, using a checklist (Yoshimura, 2009), a peer evaluation sheet (Appendix 1), and a grammar self-checklist (Appendix 2), respectively. Students were first asked to read texts that have a typical rhetorical structure of English expository writing and then use the structure in writing their own papers. 2) Writing process was divided into different stages and students were guided to pay attention to different aspects of writing at different stages. In the process, students received feedback from the teacher, participated in peer evaluation sessions, and proofreading exercises. 3) Students collaborated with each other to improve their drafts. Though feedback was given from many readers including the teacher and classmates, eventually students were asked to take responsibility for all aspects of their writing.

The course is comprised of eight cycles of three-hour reading and writing instructions (Refer to figure 1). Model texts (Ishitani, Wallis, & Embury, 2008) were used as a starting point from which students could learn the genre, the rhetorical organization, and the grammatical and lexical features. The reading process was guided by "a checklist to read English academic

texts" (Yoshimura, 2009), which implemented the reading practices that are likely to promote the connection between reading and writing: i.e. rhetorical reading (Carrell & Conner, 1991), mining (Greene, 1993), and rhetorical reading strategies (Haas & Flower, 1988).

After studying model texts in an expository subgenre carefully, students were given a writing task of the subgenre. Students were encouraged to emulate the rhetorical structure of the model texts to guide their own writing. Using the outlines students generated for their own writing, they were told to write their first drafts as their homework.

In the second class, students were assigned to a group of three or four and asked to exchange their drafts and evaluate and comment on each others' drafts by using the peer evaluation sheet (Appendix 1). At this stage, however, students were mainly asked to pay attention to the appropriateness of the content, unity, progression, and coherence and to give suggestions on how to improve their drafts and not so much on language issues. Based on the comments students had received from their classmates, they were asked to revise their first drafts.

At the end of the second class, students' first drafts were collected and the teacher wrote feedback to each student. In the feedback, the teacher commented on various aspects of the student's writing, including the content, rhetorical issues, and language use. Additionally, the teacher underlined errors or problems in the student's drafts and put marks to indicate types of errors or problems the underlined sentences contained. Students were asked to revise their drafts by improving the sentences which had been pointed out by the teacher. In addition, the teacher chose a sentence with grammatical mistakes or rhetorical problems from each student's paper and made a list of all students' errors for the coming proofreading exercises.

In the third class, students had proofreading exercises. They made groups of three or four and discussed how to improve

the sentences on the list. Then the teacher demonstrated how to improve them. This is an implementation of “focus on form” by Long and Robinson (1998), who claim that “recasts are more likely to facilitate acquisition than models” (p. 25), and explicit negative feedback was given to students about errors they had made in their drafts.

Class hour	In class	HW for students	HW for the teacher
1st class	(1) Read models and learn a target expository text structure and expressions (2) Write an outline	1st draft	
2nd class	(3) Peer evaluation	2nd draft	Feedback for each student A list of students' mistakes
3rd class	(4) Proofreading exercise	Final paper	
4th class	(5) Turn in the final paper The next cycle begins.		

**Figure 1. The structure of each instruction cycle**

Based on what they had learned from the proofreading exercises, students were again asked to revise their papers. Students turned in their final papers at the beginning of the 4th class.

Before turning them in, students were asked to double-check their papers with the grammar self-checklist (Appendix 2) for the final check of grammatical mistakes.

In this way, students' writing process was divided into different stages and they were guided to pay attention to various aspects of writing. Students were also guided to correct their errors by integrating the teacher's and classmates' comments and what they had learned from the proofreading exercises. Thus, they were gradually guided to pay attention to and to take responsibility for all aspects of their writing.

## The research

### Research questions

The question addressed by the current study was whether students' errors could be reduced with minimum help from the teacher. Since writing consists of various aspects such as content, organization, expression, writing process, and social consideration, error reduction includes not only reduction of language errors but improvement in other aspects of writing, i.e. genre consideration, content, macrostructure, microstructures, and language range and complexity (Refer to Appendix 3). Specifically, the following questions were investigated by the research:

- Question 1: How students' writing performance will change after a series of instruction used in the EFL writing course?
- Question 2: How students will perceive various kinds of activities used in the writing course?

## Participants

Participants for this research were sixty 3rd and 4th year students majoring in English at a Japanese university. Their age

range was 20 to 22 and their English proficiency ranged from 400 to 600 in TOEIC scores.

### Research design

A one group pre-test + post-test design was used in this classroom research (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, p. 139). Two kinds of student writing samples in the diagnostic tests, i.e. Writings 1 and 2, and the final paper of the first task (Writing 3) were used to investigate the change of each student's writing performance (Refer to Figure 2). Writings 1 and 2 were given before and after reading a related text, respectively, in a series of diagnostic tests. Writing 3 was turned in after receiving one cycle of the instruction. The topic for Writings 1, 2 and 3 was "Why should we Japanese study English?" The title of the related text was "Is English the world's most common language?" (Ishitani, Wallis, & Embury, 2008, p. 12). Explicit grammar instruction was not offered in task 1, though the instruction was offered in tasks 2 to 8. Survey results were also used to investigate students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the various kinds of activities used in the writing course.

### Analysis procedure

Two sets of data were used in this study. The first set consists of three kinds of writing samples, i.e., Writings 1, 2, and 3. These writing samples were evaluated by two experienced English teachers who are native speakers of English, using an evaluation sheet created by Yoshimura (2009) for analytic evaluation (Refer to Appendix 3). The evaluation sheet has six categories: genre consideration, content, macrostructure, microstructures, language range and complexity, and language errors.

The other set of data come from the post-course survey results. It was conducted to find students' perceptions on various kinds of activities used in the writing course, e.g., reading

model texts before writing their papers, participating in the peer evaluation sessions, taking part in the proofreading exercises, correcting their own errors by responding to the feedback from the teacher, using the grammar self-checklist. The survey results were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

To investigate research question 1, the scores of students' writing samples were compared in order to find any change in their writing performance. The evaluation scores were analyzed by using paired t-tests for different categories. Effects of connecting reading and writing were investigated by comparing Writings 1 and 2.

1st semester	
Class 1	Orientation and a writing test ( <b>Writing 1</b> ) as a part of the diagnostic tests
Class 2	A reading test and another writing test ( <b>Writing 2</b> ) as parts of the diagnostic tests
Class 3-5	Task 1 with the same topic as the diagnostic test (outline → 1st draft → 2nd draft → final paper)
Class 6	Turn in the final paper (Writing 3), Work on the next task (task 2)
Class 6-14	Tasks 2-4 (practicing writing in other expository subgenres)
2nd semester	
Class 15-26	Tasks 5-8 (practicing writing in other expository subgenres)
Class 26	Turn in the final paper of task 8, Wrap up, Survey

Figure 2. Data collection procedure

Effects of the instruction used in the course excluding proofreading exercises were investigated by comparing Writing 1 and 3. To investigate research question 2, survey results were used.

After one year, at the end of the course, a survey was conducted and students were asked to write down their perceptions on the activities used in the course.

## Research results

### Change in students' writing performance

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the means and standard deviations of the analytic evaluation scores for Writings 1, 2 and 3. Forty two students turned in Writings 1 and 2, and forty students turned in Writing 3. The score range for the analytic evaluation is from 1 (very poor) to 10 (excellent). Students' scores improved significantly after being exposed to a reading text (Writing 2) and after receiving a series of the instruction (Writing 3) in all six categories.

Firstly, the paired t-tests comparing Writing 1 and 2 show statistically significant changes in all six categories. This means that connecting reading and writing is in itself helpful for students to improve their writing performance. Students' language errors were reduced without receiving any feedback. It may be because students learned correct language forms from the reading text and thus reduced their language errors.

The paired t-tests comparing Writing 1 and 3 also show statistically significant changes in all six categories. This means that the instruction used in the course was effective in improving students' writing performance, which also means that their errors, including their language errors, were reduced by the instruction.

### Survey results

A survey was conducted at the end of the course, in order to ask students about their perceptions of the writing course. Thirty six students turned in the survey results. Regarding the connec-

tion between reading and writing, thirty five students said the model texts were helpful to learn organization (N=21), to learn expressions (N=13), and to learn content information (N=5). In addition, the foreknowledge of writing a paper after reading model texts seems to have influenced students' reading. For example, many students answered that because they knew that they would be asked to write a paper, they paid closer attention to the expressions (N=15), to the rhetorical structures (N=9), to the content information (N=5), and concentrated on their reading more than usual (N=3).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of analytic evaluation scores for Writings 1, 2, & 3

	Writing 1 (pre-reading)	Writing 2 (post-reading)	Writing 3 (post-instruction)
Genre awareness	6.9 (0.8)	7.1** (0.8)	8.3** (0.8)
Content	6.3 (1.0)	6.8** (0.9)	8.1** (0.8)
Macrostructure	6.3 (1.0)	6.8** (0.9)	7.8** (0.8)
Microstructures	6.1 (0.9)	6.6** (0.9)	7.5** (0.9)
Lang. range & complexity	5.8 (0.8)	6.3** (0.8)	7.2** (0.8)
Language errors	5.8 (0.8)	6.1** (0.8)	6.7** (0.7)

N=42 for W1&2, N=40 for W3, \*  $p<.05$ , \*\*  $p<.01$

Students' perceptions on the peer evaluation sessions suggest that they learned various things from the sessions. Some noticed



that sentences that made sense to them did not make sense to others (N=11). Some learned various ideas, appropriate rhetorical structures, and English expressions (N=9). Some learned grammatical mistakes they also tended to make by looking at their classmates' papers (N=4). However, two students wrote that they had not learned much because of a lack of their grammatical knowledge.

Students' perceptions on the proofreading exercises suggest that they actively took part in the exercises and listened to the teacher's explanation attentively. They paid attention not only to their own but also to other students' errors and problems. Some students noticed that they tended to make similar types of errors to those made by other students (N=11). Some students learned how to find and correct errors and inappropriate expressions (N=11). Importantly, five students mentioned the difficulty of choosing appropriate words and some of them mentioned the importance of reading in order to learn appropriate expressions. According to Ferris (2002), there are treatable errors and untreatable errors and errors in word choice are categorized as untreatable errors. By experiencing the difficulty of correcting errors in word choice for themselves, students became aware of the importance of learning appropriate word choice from reading practices.

From correcting their own errors by responding to the teacher's feedback, students seem to have learned the tendency of their language errors (N=8), the importance of rereading texts (N=10), what they should pay attention to (N=10), and the importance of checking the usage of language with dictionaries (N=3). Regarding the grammar self-check list, most students (92%) used it to check their drafts. However, many students (77%) answered that they had used it sometimes, not always.

## Discussion

The fact that students' writing scores improved significantly after being exposed to a reading text suggests that connecting reading and writing in itself helps learners reduce errors and improve their writing performance. Students' writing performance improved further after receiving a cycle of instruction. It suggests that various kinds of activities used in the writing course may be effective in developing learners' writing skills and reduce their errors.

Survey results reveal that students perceived the activities used in the writing course to be effective. In the writing course, various promising approaches and activities were employed to minimize the teacher's workload and to maximize the effects of the course. For example, the following approaches and activities were used: connecting reading and writing, process approach, peer evaluation sessions, proofreading exercises, students' self-correction after getting feedback from the teacher and classmates, and proofreading their drafts with a grammar self-checklist. These approaches and activities jointly seem to have helped learners improve their overall writing performance and reduce errors with minimum intervention from the teacher.

## Summary and limitations

The questions addressed in this research were how students' writing performance would change after receiving the instruction that implemented promising methods and approaches for improving their writing skills and for reducing errors, and how students would perceive the instruction. Students' writing performance improved significantly after being exposed to a reading material and also after receiving a cycle of the instruction. Students' comments suggest that students perceived the activities used in the course to be useful and effective in developing their writing skills. Thus, even with minimum intervention by

the teacher, learners can improve their writing performance and reduce the number of errors to a certain extent by connecting reading and writing, writing multiple drafts, and collaborating with classmates.

This research, however, has various limitations and the following points need to be considered in interpreting the results:

1. The small sample size needs to be considered in generalizing the research results.
2. Because there was no control group against which to compare the effects, it is difficult to attribute the improvements in students' writing performance to the instruction alone.
3. The validity of different kinds of activities used in the course needs to be examined individually in future research studies.
4. To investigate long-term effects of the instruction on students' learning, longitudinal research needs to be conducted in future research studies.

Regardless of the numerous limitations, the research demonstrates beneficial effects of the activities used in the writing course. Students may write ineffective papers not because they lack language knowledge but because their target setting may be inappropriate or they use inappropriate writing process. In such a case, preemptive methods (e.g., modeling or guiding their writing process) may be more effective than reactive methods (e.g., providing feedback). In this study, students did not know what structure or expressions should be used, nor how to tackle a writing task. Therefore, models were offered through reading practices and students were guided through cycles of a set writing process. However, we tend to make mistakes even when we have an explicit knowledge of something. For example, students tend to make the same mistakes repeatedly in their writing performance, regardless of their knowledge of appropriate language forms. Reactive methods may be effective in such a

case. However, corrective feedback from the teacher is only one of numerous reactive methods. There are many ways to handle errors, including learners' reading their drafts repeatedly and getting feedback from their peers. By integrating and implementing various promising approaches and methods, we may teach English writing more effectively.

### Acknowledgment

The author offers sincere gratitude to Prof. Tatyana Sayenko and the anonymous reviewers for providing valuable comments and suggestions.

### Bio data

**Fumiko Yoshimura** is an associate professor at Tohoku Gakuin University. Her research interests include L2 reading and writing. <f-yoshi@tsc.tohoku-gakuin.ac.jp>

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## Appendix I

### Essay writing III peer evaluation sheet

- Your partner's essay title \_\_\_\_\_
- Your partner's name \_\_\_\_\_

### Evaluators

- Your name \_\_\_\_\_  
Your student number \_\_\_\_\_
- Your name \_\_\_\_\_  
Your student number \_\_\_\_\_

### First reading

- Read the text to find out your partner's ideas.
- What did you like about your partner's draft?
- Are your opinions similar to or different from those of your partners'?

### Second reading

- Does the draft have sufficient length? If not, what should be added?
- Is the draft well-organized? If not, how should it be reorganized?
- Tell your partner which part caused trouble in understanding the content?
- What would you like to suggest so that your partner can improve the draft?

### Third reading

Tell your partner if you find grammatical mistakes, wrong word choice, or spelling errors.

## Appendix 2

### Grammar self-checklist

下の例のような間違いをしていないか確認してください。

1. 名詞には冠詞をつけているか。
2. 単数、複数の区別を確認する。
3. 動詞の時制は正しいか。
4. 動詞からみて、主語が正しく書けているか。
5. 動詞は、きちんとしているか。
6. 前置詞がちゃんと使われているか。
7. 不完全な文になっていないか。
8. 自動詞と他動詞の区別ができていないか。

## Appendix 3

### Evaluation sheet

Please use the following criteria and evaluate the compositions.

<i>Genre consideration</i>	
level	criteria
9-10	<b>Excellent to good:</b> relevant to the assigned topic, shows consideration of audience and genre
7-8	<b>Good to average:</b> mostly relevant to the assigned topic, shows some consideration of audience and genre
5-6	<b>Fair to poor:</b> not very relevant to the assigned topic, does not show consideration of audience and genre very much
1-4	<b>Very poor:</b> not relevant to the assigned topic, does not show consideration for audience and genre at all, or not enough to evaluate
<i>Content</i>	
9-10	<b>Excellent to good:</b> knowledgeable, substantive, thorough development of thesis
7-8	<b>Good to average:</b> some knowledge of the subject, adequate substance, limited development of thesis
5-6	<b>Fair to poor:</b> limited knowledge of the subject, little substance, inadequate development
1-4	<b>Very poor:</b> does not show knowledge of the subject, non-substantive, or not enough to evaluate
<i>Macro structure</i>	
9-10	<b>Excellent to good:</b> idea clearly stated and supported, well-organized, logical sequencing

7-8	<b>Good to average:</b> loosely organized but main ideas stand out, somewhat logical
5-6	<b>Fair to poor:</b> ideas confusing or disconnected, lacks logical sequencing
1-4	<b>Very poor:</b> does not communicate ideas, no organization, or not enough to evaluate

### *Micro structures*

9-10	<b>Excellent to good:</b> fluent flow, detailed description
7-8	<b>Good to average:</b> somewhat fluent flow, somewhat detailed description
5-6	<b>Fair to poor:</b> choppy, ideas not connected well, few or no details
1-4	<b>Very poor:</b> does not communicate ideas, or not enough to evaluate

### *Language range and complexity*

9-10	<b>Excellent to good:</b> effective and complex constructions, sophisticated language range, appropriate word/idiom choice and usage
7-8	<b>Good to average:</b> effective but simple constructions, adequate language range, somewhat appropriate word/idiom choice and usage
5-6	<b>Fair to poor:</b> poor mastery of sentence constructions, limited language range and inappropriate word/idiom choice and usage
1-4	<b>Very poor:</b> no mastery of sentence constructions, little knowledge of language, or not enough to evaluate

### *Language errors*

9-10	<b>Excellent to good:</b> few errors in sentence constructions and/or word choice/form
7-8	<b>Good to average:</b> minor problems in sentence constructions and/or word choice/form
5-6	<b>Fair to poor:</b> major problems in constructions and/or word choice/form
1-4	<b>Very poor:</b> no mastery of English constructions and/or vocabulary, or not enough to evaluate