

Practicing Correction Codes to Improve English Writing Skills

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Abstract: *Writing skills can be sharpened effectively by analyzing errors and eliminating the same by the learners themselves. The learners need to be conscious about the errors / mistakes / slips while writing. Once they realize their mistakes in using the language, they try to rectify themselves and own the responsibility for their improvement. The present study aims to enhance the effect of correction symbols on promoting learners' abilities to correct their mistakes and examine the use of symbols as a strategy to encourage students to think about their mistakes and to correct them themselves. This process is based on the notion that when learners are actively involved in the process of self-correction, they will involve to do this effectively. Further, it is also based on the idea that teachers should take learners' attitudes into account in order to develop a strategy to evaluate their students' scripts.*

Keywords: *Improving Writing Skills, Error Analysis, Error Codes, Error Correction, Self-Correction*

1. INTRODUCTION

Error analysis and error correction remains a popular teaching practice in both written and spoken contexts. Its use has declined in recent years as a result of increased concern with communication. However the basic assumption underlying the practice of elimination of errors is still largely taken for granted - that correction plays a vital role in the development of students' ability to speak and write accurately. For most teachers, the concern continues to be one of the queries – ‘when to correct errors’ and ‘how to correct them’. Against this background, the paper focuses on using errors codes for error analysis and error correction in improving writing skills. The use of error codes help students correct their writing has often been proved to be an effective method to facilitate error correction. The correction code, is a list of grammatical items such as nouns, articles, prepositions and so on, is a common error feedback technique in English class. “It is believed to be a useful method of helping students correct their own errors, as students need to be guided in discovering the nature of their errors; otherwise, correcting errors on their own risks would become a task that could require extraordinary effort and may end in frustration. Moreover, in a traditional English class students get less opportunity to participate actively in the lesson and get less opportunity to learn how to write correctly with appropriate punctuation, spelling, grammar, text organization, capitalization and word order. As a result the students make different types of errors in their writing and gradually they become frustrated as they do not get enough guidance for their improvement. On the other hand, it is really difficult for a teacher to mark all the mistakes of all the students’ papers providing correct answers.

Teachers can utilize students’ mistakes as their teaching tools using correction code on their writing so that they can improve writing skills easily. Riddell (2001, p. 157) states that teachers can use correction symbols (correction codes) to give feedback to students on their writing, and teachers can underline the errors to signify the mistakes and write the symbols for these mistakes in the margin. Then students can correct the mistakes by themselves. Hedge (1988, p.151) suggests that teachers can indicate “an error and identify the kind of error with a symbol, e.g. wo = wrong word order”. This means that teacher can use correction codes when giving feedback on writing tasks and then students should find out the errors they made from the symbols and re-write it again with the corrected mistakes. This

strategy “encourages learner independence” (Riddell, 2001, p. 152) and students become more responsible for their learning. Moreover, students can learn better from their mistakes when they correct their work by themselves. The purpose of this study was to measure the effectiveness of the coded correction system in general, and to uncover the potential significant factors which might involve in and influence the results of the coded correction system.

2. CORRECTION CODES

Correction symbols / codes refer to the indication of types and locations of students’ mistakes through the use of correction codes such as those suggested by Oshima and Hogue (1997). The application of correction codes is “normally done by underlining the mistakes and using some kind of symbols to focus the attention of the students on the kind of mistake they have made” (Byrne, 1988, p. 125). So, the coding technique consists of using a number of different codes (either in the body or in a corresponding margin) to refer to the different aspects of language such as word order, spelling, verb, tense etc. Correction symbols are also called minimal marking. Using correction codes is a convenient way of giving learners information on where they have gone wrong and “it is convenient to have a system of signals to the learner in order to help him to know what s/he is looking for before s/he has acquired much proof-reading skill” Bright and McGregor (1970, p. 156). In addition, “this technique makes correction neater and less threatening than masses of red ink and helps students to find and identify their mistakes” (Hyland, 2003, p.181) and “makes correction look less damaging” (Harmer, 2007, p. 121) . “These also have the advantage of encouraging students to think about what the mistake is, so that they can correct themselves” (ibid., 2001, p. 111), correction codes encourage students to look at writing as a skill that can be improved, and train them in looking for areas of improvement (Hedge, 2000, p. 316). Students can therefore correct their mistakes because their mistakes occur in “the hurly-burly of communication (oral / written) where there are many things to get right at the same time. The learner knows the right form, but produces the wrong one” (Johnson, 2001, p. 335).

3. INFLUENCE OF CORRECTION WITH ERROR CODES ON STUDENTS

The use of error codes to help students correct their writing has often been propounded in the literature as an effective method to facilitate error correction. It is believed to be a useful method of helping students to correct their own errors. As both Allwright (1975) and Long (1977) point out, it is important for teachers not to correct learner errors or give the right answers to them immediately. Cues should be given to the students so that they can correct their own errors. This will further activate their linguistic competence. Lalande (1982) found that American students who used error codes to correct errors in German had greater improvement in writing than the students who had their errors corrected by their teachers. Mantello (1997) found that coded feedback was effective for weak students. Makino (1993) showed that Japanese learners of English were helped to correct errors better when cues were given than when they were not. Kubota (2001) also reports that her Japanese learners found coding errors useful in helping them correct errors.

Lee (1997) did carry out a study on the students’ performance in error correction with Hong Kong English learners. However, she has reservations about using error codes. Though she suggests that error feedback is more desirable than overt correction, she warns teachers that error feedback with the help of error codes must be handled with care. Thus, what is reported in the literature mainly focuses on whether error codes help error correction. This study attempts to investigate the usefulness of error codes to help English learners correct their errors more successfully. In an attempt to examine the effectiveness of using correction symbols to give feedback in the writing process, the teacher hypothesizes that the provision of correction symbols strategy would have positive effects on promoting learners’ self-correction and would improve their written production. Before looking further into the use of correction codes, let us focus on the three forms of errors - Mistake, Error and Slip.

1. A mistake is "a performance error that is either a random guess or a ‘slip,’ in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly." Mistake can only be corrected by the student if the deviance is pointed out to him or her. Mistake implies misconception, misunderstanding, a

wrong but not always blameworthy judgment, or inadvertence; it expresses less severe criticism than error.

2. Errors require further relevant learning to take place before they can be self-corrected. Errors are problems that a native speaker would not have. Error etymologically implies deviation; it suggests culpability but not necessarily carelessness or intention, for it implies a guide to be followed such as a record or manuscript, or a rule or set of rules, or a principle, law, accepted code, or the like.
3. A slip is what a learner can self-correct, and an error is what a learner can't self-correct. An attempt is a guess or when neither the intended meaning nor the structure is clear to the teacher. Slips (or lapses of the tongue or pen) can quickly be detected and self-corrected by their author unaided.

Before applying the new correction method with the students, it would be better the teacher to divide the classes into three sessions. In the first session, teacher provides the students with a list of correction symbols adapted from Oshima and Hogue (1997). Then, the teacher explained the different symbols of the different mistakes. In the second session, teacher carries on explanations of correction symbols. The teacher sometimes showed the whole class PowerPoint slides with examples demonstrating how to edit a composition successfully following the clues provided by the teacher. In the third session, teacher the students with a few practice sheets to teach them how to correct their mistakes following the cues provided by the teachers. Then, students were asked to write paragraphs on different topics. The students' papers were collected and corrected, out of class using correction symbols. Finally, the students are asked to write three kinds of paragraphs as their written assignments in English Class. After the students submitted the first draft of their paragraphs, the teacher put codes for error correction on the students' work. These codes were developed by the teacher based on common errors made by past students in writing paragraphs in this course. Following James' (James, 1998, p. 95) guideline that description of students' errors must be "simple, self-explanatory and easily learnable", examples of wrong and right sentences were given for each code on the editing checklist to help the students understand how to correct the errors.

In the initial stages of using error codes, the learners felt that they needed teacher's support to analyze their errors and eliminating the same. Later, they could avoid making similar mistakes again because they could review the errors by studying the editing checklist. Finally, the majority of the students said that they liked correcting their own mistakes.

The process of correcting their writing using the correction symbols provided by the teacher could help the learners not only in improving their writing skills but also in developing their autonomy; and in increasing their motivation. Following these methods, the researcher facilitated ambiance for error analysis and error correction using error codes / symbols. When asked a direct question to one of the regular and attentive students' of the class, "Did the correction codes help you to be more skilled and independent?" The student answered-"Yes, it helped me a lot. Earlier in the semester, with the help of correction code, I can find out the mistakes by myself and correct it by myself. And now I don't need any one to help me to correct the mistakes for me; I can do it by myself. And from codes I know what my mistakes are and I can correct it easily."

Another student expressed "I want to write by myself, but I do not have the skills to do so. The teacher must give us the way how to write and the topic and then let us do it by ourselves." So it is clear that students had a genuine desire to be developed as autonomous writers. One of the students also said, "The correction codes helped her to be more independent. Now, if the teacher give us any topic to write I can do it, it becomes easier for me now after using the new strategy of correcting our own mistakes." So it becomes almost clear that students like the strategy of self-correction, and they are motivated to write independently. According to Benson and Voller (1997, p.82) "Students' willingness to act independently depends on the level of their motivation and confidence". And the teacher believes that the new process of error correction helps the students to be more confident and dynamic.

4. A FEW PRACTICALITIES IN PRACTICING ERROR CODES

The teacher discovers few new ideas when she started applying this new approach of correcting student's writing using correcting symbols. She realizes that this new approach of correcting mistakes will be able to create few new opportunities promoting the whole learning process as —

- It may facilitate in-class peer correction work. Student errors truly become learning opportunities.
- It creates instant homework!
- It supports top-down and inductive learning styles.
- It cuts down of correcting time.
- Students are forced to consider what effect their writing has on others.
- By focusing on only some of the errors, it's easier for students to see recurring errors in their work.
- It supports structural and sentence level approaches to grammar teaching.

The following are some related drawbacks that the teacher may notice in the class when applied the new methods of correcting students' papers using error codes:

- Some students prefer having 'the answers'.
- Students may be able to correct 'slip' but not 'errors'.
- It does not support students with bottom-up learning styles.
- It clashes with some students learning expectations. Many students expect a teacher to provide corrections, in the old fashioned way.
- There may not be a code for every type of error.
- Sometimes there are more than one problems embedded in an error.
- Teacher can easily de-motivate a student by putting in too many codes.

5. A FEW STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THE DIFFICULTIES IN PRACTICING ERROR CODES

1. ***Importance of common understanding about grammatical knowledge:*** The students can correct the errors because they were taught grammatical terms and rules in their secondary schools. Since the use of error codes is based on the assumption that the students know the grammatical terms and understand the concepts associated with the grammatical terms used in the correction code before error codes are introduced (Lee 1997), it is important to discover the grammatical knowledge held by the students before error codes are introduced. It must be ensured that both the teacher and the students use the same meta-language and have the same understanding about the meaning of grammatical terms before they can communicate successfully through the codes. If the students lack this knowledge, they need to be taught the grammatical terms first. Even if the students have such previous knowledge, it is better to review relevant grammatical concepts with the students before the codes are put on their work. Teachers should pay more attention to the types of codes which lead to less successful error correction as identified through this study. They could also spend more time teaching the students the grammatical items related to those codes so as to help them correct their errors more successfully.
2. ***Methods to help the students acquire common understanding about grammatical knowledge:*** An editing checklist with examples given, like the one designed for this study, is useful means to help the students acquire grammatical knowledge or review what they have learnt in the past. To address Lee's (1997) doubt that mere provision of example sentences in the correction code can help students correct their errors, the examples on the editing checklist in this study were supplemented by teacher explanation of the concepts in class and some exercises given to the students to practice how to use the editing checklist. In other words, putting good examples relevant to the students' type of

writing on the editing checklist, carefully explaining the rules in class and providing students with enough practice on how to use the error codes on the editing checklist are useful methods to help the students make proper use of the error codes to correct errors effectively. The success of this study suggests that the techniques mentioned above need to be used in conjunction with the codes when students want to correct errors successfully with the help of codes. The methods used in this study worked well with the students, and they could become a framework for other teachers to follow in the design and use of editing checklists in teaching.

3. **Providing practice sheets:** To make full use of the marking codes, teachers need to ensure that students are clear about the grammar rules. Teachers should come up with a list of correction codes that students can manage and make better use of it. This will help the students to become de-motivated in reading and learning from the marked compositions. Therefore, teachers need to teach them explicitly and provide students with ample practice until they can master the meta-linguistic terms and knowledge to understand the corrections. As suggested by (Ferris & Roberts 2001), students will be able to develop accuracy if a system of marking codes is used consistently throughout the term and their knowledge about the system is reinforced through lessons. Teaching meta-cognitive strategies will let students know that there are other ways to learn from feedback and that they are responsible for their own learning to a certain extent.
4. **Teacher–student conference:** Moreover, regarding errors that the students did not know how to correct even with the hints given by the codes, the teacher needs to teach them how to correct these errors, for example, through teacher-student conferences. In fact, the use of error codes could best be supplemented by teacher’s explanations when necessary.

It is recommended a more humanistic approach to self-access activities which aims to develop both the declarative and the procedural knowledge of the learners, whilst at the same time making a positive and broadening contribution to their personal and linguistic development. The materials need to be self-access in the conventional sense of providing opportunities for learners to choose what to work on and to do so in their own time and at their own pace. The materials aim to engage the learners’ individuality in the activities in such a way as to exploit their prior experience and to provide opportunities for personal development. It needs to involve the learners as human beings rather than just as language learners.

6. CONCLUSION

The observations from the study, and the interaction prove that students prefer coded feedback a lot as with the help of the correction codes they get enough opportunity to know about their mistakes and to correct them as well. The study also proves that the students are benefited a lot in this process of error correction as they need to do regular practice on error correction. In fact the correction symbols provided by their teacher work as inspiration for them. When they receive direct clues from their teacher they feel responsibility to complete their tasks properly. So this process of error correction engages the students in a continuous process of correcting, re-writing and submitting their written production to their teacher which obviously improve their overall writing skill a lot.

Finally it can be said that teachers should be aware of the effect of their feedback practices on their students through observing their improvement in writing, and identifying their attitudes. Through this work, the teacher has investigated the effects of correction symbols on promoting students’ self-correction. The results show that students are interested in developing their writing skill and correcting their own mistakes, and therefore, want and expect their teachers to use correction codes in marking their written work. The study emphasizes that feedback cannot be rigidly based on any standardized practice derived from the opinions of teachers alone, but must be flexible enough to incorporate the attitudes and needs of the students. In addition, feedback should be used in which students benefit from it and they are encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning, and thereby, result in better learning. To conclude, it can be said that this work has contributed to give a glimpse of the effect of correction symbols, and can pave the way for those who are interested to use this

technique of using correction symbols for providing feedback to their students for their better learning.

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