Major Article 02

Effective Mistake Correction in Writing and an Application : The Maltepe Project 2004

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**Menu**

"*The palest ink is better than the sharpest memory.*"

*Chinese Proverb*

**Introduction**
Educating competent enough writers both in a foreign language is a long, winding, bumpy road where travelers have to sweat a lot and unlike speaking, accuracy is the sine qua non for being an effective in the target language. A speaker has a great range of expressive possibilities at their command – apart from the actual words they uses – such as intonation and stress which help them to show which parts, for instance, they wish to be taken seriously. It is also possible to re-phrase what he/she is saying or speed up (or slow down) depending on the feedback they get from the listeners. Moreover, the speaker has the opportunity to use their  body, gestures, mimics, etc. to get their ideas across to the others (Harmer, J. 1983), and a speaker can also be understood well by their  listeners even if they are not the master of that language. There are, for example, a long list of fillers in English like "er…", "uhm…", "You know…", "What I mean…", etc. They all help the speaker express themselves in one way or the other and a mastery of such linguistic techniques to cover up a fairly weak knowledge of the language often provokes initial admiration on the part of native speakers such as, "How well you speak English!", "You're almost a native speaker!" and so on (Byrne, D. 1980. Cited in Smith, M.S. 1976).

However, when it comes to writing, things get more serious as there is no listener, no gestures or mimics, etc., and the learner is forced to concentrate on communicating their ideas, feelings in the target language. Only then does that so-called "fluent" speaker understand how vital to increase the time spent on practicing to write and contrary to speaking in which mistakes can be tolerated, a piece of writing, in Harmer's(1983) terms, with mistakes and half-finished sentences, etc. would be judged by many native speakers as illiterate since it is expected that writing should be "correct". Therefore, accuracy is still the prevailing issue in writing in L2 starting from the early stages to the advanced.

Most language learners find the writing a difficult-to-acquire skill and rather time-consuming. So do the teachers. Besides the enormous workload of reading the written work, teachers usually think correction process is almost always a futile effort since most of the corrected written work is tucked away into the books or notebooks and forgotten there. Moreover, this kind of spoon-feeding approach might leave students disarmed in the future as they will not be fully aware of the mistakes they have made at each stage of writing process such as copying, doing exercises, guided and free writing.

Correcting students' written work is , then, surely a painstaking effort and when the feedback is not very much fruitful, it could lead both the teacher and the students to frustration, so it is essential that correction process should be, in Brumfit's (1980) terms, a genuine learning process by using an effective self-correction technique through which learners will become skilled mistake-recognizers.

Therefore, this paper aims :
(1) To have learners recognize the mistakes determined according to specific criteria by correcting their classmates' written work,
(2) to minimize the number of  pre-determined mistake types after seeing and correcting them repeatedly,
(3) to contribute to developing oral fluency practice while discussing in groups or in pairs over a correction or a mistake in the written work

**Advantages of self-correction**
As Brumfit (1980) stated, there are a number of advantages in students' correcting their own work after they have undergone certain steps in doing so. First of all, practice in looking for mistakes in other students' work helps a learner to pinpoint mistakes in their own work more easily and it might also help them find out that something they have considered correct until then, can be proved to be incorrect. Secondly, doing the correction immediately after the written work will provide  more meaningful learning  since the points studied are still fresh in the learner's mind. Thirdly, group or pair discussion can also contribute to students' oral fluency practice as they talk over the mistakes and try to reach a consensus among themselves. Finally, for teachers it is a constructive activity rather than a passive criticism and judgement, devoting hours for scribbling over them for hours at home. So putting more of the responsibility on students for correction develops a sense of self-sufficiency. It also helps some "wean" students from dependency on the teacher for correction (Wood, N.M, 1993).

At first students are asked to write a piece and hand it to  the teacher who by using a correction table, corrects only the mistakes made at structural level. While doing so, the teacher underlines each mistake in each line, and identify it in the margin (the writing papers with a margin line about 4 cm width) by using correction codes.The next lesson before handing back the written work to the students, the teacher explains what each symbol stands for and by presenting a few sample sentences on the board he/she gives a demonstration of how the mistakes will be corrected and then, putting the students into groups of three or four (depending on the class size), the papers are handed to the groups to do the correction work in pencil so that they can be discussed later. However, at this point, the teacher has to pay special attention in paper distribution in such a way that no student's paper should go to the group of which he/she is the member (thus offending or embarrassing that student by his/her peers is avoided). During the correction process (particularly at lower levels) the teacher plays a monitoring role by simply walking around the class without interfering directly, but offering help when asked.

**The "Ladder Technique" (Adapted from Brumfit, C.J. 1977)**
**1. Procedure**
Although Brumfit (1980) developed this technique to employ at the most advanced stages of free writing, I suggest that this technique can also be employed in language classes with students of intermediate, pre-intermediate or even elementary levels provided that it should be adjusted accordingly and correction should always be a teaching, not a testing device (Brumfit, C.J. 1980). By this method, not only are the student expected to become competent writers in English language but also it is aimed to reduce the amount of guidance that the teacher offers to a minimum.

It is a six to twelve-week scheme in which students undergo a process of writing steps, each of which lasts one to two weeks(See Table 1). The teacher follows a writing syllabus or it can be squeezed in a skills course or main course syllabus in which most writing falls in a continuum from controlled to semi-controlled to free writing.

Table 1. A six-week "Ladder Technique" (Adapted from Brumfit's correcting
    errors in written work, 1980)

| | |
|---|---|
| **Step 1 :** Underline the mistake and identify it in the margin | w/w    sp    She <u>did </u>many mista<u>ks</u>. |
| **Step 2 :** Underline the mistake but do not identify | She <u>did </u>many mista<u>ks</u>. |
| **Step 3 :** Identify the mistake but do not show where the mistake in the line is | w/w    sp    She did many mistaks. |
| **Step 4 :** Simply put an arrow in the margin for each mistake | ⟶    ⟶    She did many mistaks. |
| **Step 5 :** Put an arrow for each line with a mistake (but do not show how many) | ⟶    She did many mistaks. |
| **Step 6 :** Hand the work back to the groups for discussion without correcting it at all | She did many mistaks. |

## 2. Correction Symbols
Determining the type and the number of correction symbols is of vital importance, particularly at lower levels (elementary and pre-intermediate). So it essential that correction symbols should indicate the most problematic language areas and preferably denote structural ones where the learners are likely to make mistakes (See Table 2).

Table 2. Correction Table

| Symbol | **Meaning** |
|---|---|
| SVA | Subject-Verb Agreement |
| W/W | Wrong Word |
| Sp | Spelling |
| Pl/Sing | Plural / Singular |
| ARt | Article |
| Pnct | Punctuation |
| Prep | Preposition |
| T | Tense |

## 3. Self-Improvement Record Sheet (SIRS)
SIRS has been developed to closely observe each subject and see how much progress they made during the process (if any). Though these cards seem to be an extra burden for the teacher, they

are not. The subjects can be asked to write the mistakes they have made as they go over their written work. Then the SIRSs are collected and kept in a file by the teacher for further analyses.

Table 3. Self-Improvement Record Sheet (SIRS)

| Stage : ….. | Number of Errors | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Name : …………<br>………………… | SVA | W/W | Sp | Pl / Sing | ARt | Pnct | Prep | T | Total |
| 1st writing task | | | | | | | | | |
| 2nd writing task | | | | | | | | | |

**The Maltepe Project ( Istanbul)**
The project has been conducted with the students at Prep School, Maltepe University, Istanbul for a period of six weeks. A group of 27 subjects have participated in the project, 11 of which are girls and 16 are boys aging between 18-23. The group were streamed as C Level (Elementary) students after the placement test.

**Observed Results**
The Ladder Technique was used only for six weeks and except the sixth, at each stage the written work was collected by the teacher and corrected according to the procedure mentioned here and handed back to the subjects to do the correction in groups of three or four (sometimes in pairs due to the number of the subjects available in class at that time). During the correction process, the teacher acted as an "ombudsman" whenever the groups had a dispute or when the discussion over a correction came to a deadlock.

After each step was over, the papers were handed back to their owners and asked to examine papers thoroughly and make objections to any correction if they think it is wrong.
Then the papers were recollected by the teacher so that the number of errors could be tallied up and recorded in the self-improvement record sheet (SIRS). Here logging the mistakes in the SIRS was done by the teacher.

**Analysis of the data**
Starting from the first step of "Ladder Technique" all the written work was scanned and the total number of errors for each correction symbol at each stage (See Table 4).

Table 4. Number of mistakes for each criterion at each step.

| Type of errors | 1st Step | 2nd Step | 3rd Step | 4th Step | 5th Step | 6th Step |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA) | 7 | 5 | 46 | 18 | 14 | 12 |
| Wrong Word (W /W) | 15 | 9 | 12 | 8 | 11 | 15 |
| Spelling (Sp) | 19 | 6 | 7 | 13 | 13 | 12 |
| Plural/Singular (Pl /Sing) | 4 | 3 | 1 | 23 | 15 | 10 |
| | | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Article (Art) | 16 | 5 | 1 | 17 | 10 | 9 |
| Punctuation (Pnct) | 6 | 5 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 3 |
| Preposition (Prep) | 8 | 11 | 12 | 9 | 20 | 21 |
| Tense (T) | 0 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 15 |

**Student Questionnaire**

During the application of the "Ladder Technique" (at some point half-way) a questionnaire was given to the subjects to see how effective / ineffective; fruitful / unfruitful the technique was and how the subjects felt about it. Ten questions were included in the questionnaire and the subjects were asked to answer on a basis of five choices ranging from "Certainly Yes" to "Certainly No". The questionnaire was given in Turkish (L1) to avoid any possible problems in understanding the questions.

The questionnaire was given to the objects at one sitting and at that time there were only 19 subjects were present. To make them feel more relaxed and stress-free (and surely more frank!) they were told that they did not have to write their names on the questionnaire.

Table 5. Analysis of the data

| | Certainly Yes | Yes | Not Sure | No | Certainly No |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Writing in English is absolutely a difficult skill. | 10% | 52% | 15% | 15% | 5% |
| 2. Writing in English is more difficult than speaking. | 10% | 42% | 15% | 26% | 5% |
| 3. Assignments and class activities help improve my writing skills | 36% | 47% | 5% | 5% | - |
| 4. Correcting the mistakes in my classmates' papers is an effective study. | 15% | 47% | 26% | 5% | - |
| 5. Group work is motivating | 21% | 47% | 26% | 5% | - |
| 6. I feel more self-confident knowing that the teacher will help when needed. | 52% | 36% | 5% | 5% | - |
| 7. It is embarrassing to see my mistakes and the correction on my paper. | - | 5% | - | 42% | 52% |
| 8. It is best if the teacher corrects my mistakes and return it to me. | 10% | 10% | 52% | 15% | 10% |

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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9. I am rather reticent to discuss my opinion in the group. | - | 15% | 15% | 31% | 32% |
| 10. At every stage of this application I feel more confident. | 29% | 36% | 26% | 5% | - |

**Encountered Shortcomings**
**1. Problems related to the present educational system**
Learners' motivation was a major problem since the medium of instruction is Turkish at Maltepe University and even if the students fail in prep class, they have the right to start their undergraduate studies but they are required to pass the proficiency tests given twice every year until they graduate. So in order to motivate them the subjects were slightly 'threatened' in the way that they would not be able to get graduated unless they passed the prep class in four years.
As a starting point, I had to talk them into being an accurate and efficient writer in English and explained that the writing section in all the tests is valued by 25 points out of 100. Since most of them were exam-oriented, it worked to an extent.
The second problem was the learners' unfortunate L1 experiences in writing. The majority of the subjects stated that they devoted very little or no time to writing activities in their secondary and high school education and the only 'serious' writing activity they did was free writing as they were assumed that they were 'competent writers' in Turkish. They hardly had any proper writing skills in L1 to be transferred in L2.

**2. Problems related to the application process**
During the application of "Ladder Technique", the main problem encountered was absenteeism and due to this fact, a proper SIRS (Student Improvement Record Sheet) file could not be kept. Though some benign and determined learners later handed their writing, a good one-third participated class activities irregularly. Thus, instead of each subject's writing twelve pieces for six weeks, some remained at seven or eight. Since all of the writings and all the correction steps were done in the class, attendance was of vital importance. The second problem was that some of the subjects, while working in their groups usually took the initiative and without discussing with the group members did the correction. Those subjects were usually the ones whose level of English was well above the other members in the group. To minimize this, the teacher walked more in the class as a monitor interfering upon seeing one-man show in a group. The third problem was mainly of classroom time devoted to writing activities. Seven hours a week was not enough to complete the project in six weeks satisfactorily due to reading, speaking and listening skills included in the skills course syllabus. Had there been more class hours, the "Ladder Technique" would have been much more effective.

**Conclusions**
The importance of self-correction is unquestionable as it allows the learners to become skilled in recognizing their mistakes and to be competent writers in a foreign language learning process once the specific correction symbols / codes are determined. At this point, The Maltepe Project on self-correction employing the "Ladder Technique" on a piloting group of 27 subjects reached its aims not fully, but mostly.

Firstly, the project aimed to have learners recognize mistakes for a specific set of criteria by correcting their classmates' written work. This aim was achieved by the careful reinforcement of each criterion repeatedly, thus the subjects became skilled in recognizing mistakes for a specific set of criteria which, in this case, was limited to eight language areas. Secondly, it was aimed to reduce the re-occurrence of mistakes in writing to a minimum and in five out of eight mistakes types, a remarkable decrease was observed. Subject-verb Agreement(SVA) mistakes were reduced to 12%; Spelling (Sp) mistakes to 12%; mistakes in Plural/Singular(Pl/Sing) to 10%; Article (Art) mistakes to 9%; and Punctuation(Pnct) mistakes to 3%. Thirdly, the aim was to contribute to learners' oral fluency practice as they discuss in groups during the correction process. Since all of the subjects were at elementary stage in English, it was not very likely to have them speak English during the

group work. Yet, they were encouraged to use expressions like, "No, I don't agree with you," ; "Yes, I agree." ; "What about this?"; "That's not correct." ; "I think it is correct." etc., but still most of the discussion in group work activities was conducted in L1,which was tolerable at this stage.

Finally, the questionnaire given to the subjects during the project showed that they found self-correction useful (63 %) and helpful in building self-confidence(62%). Furthermore, the subjects saw the whole  process as a contribution to their writing skills (83%) and accepted the fact that making mistakes was a natural outcome of writing in a foreign language so they overcame the fear of seeing their mistakes corrected in their paper (94%).

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