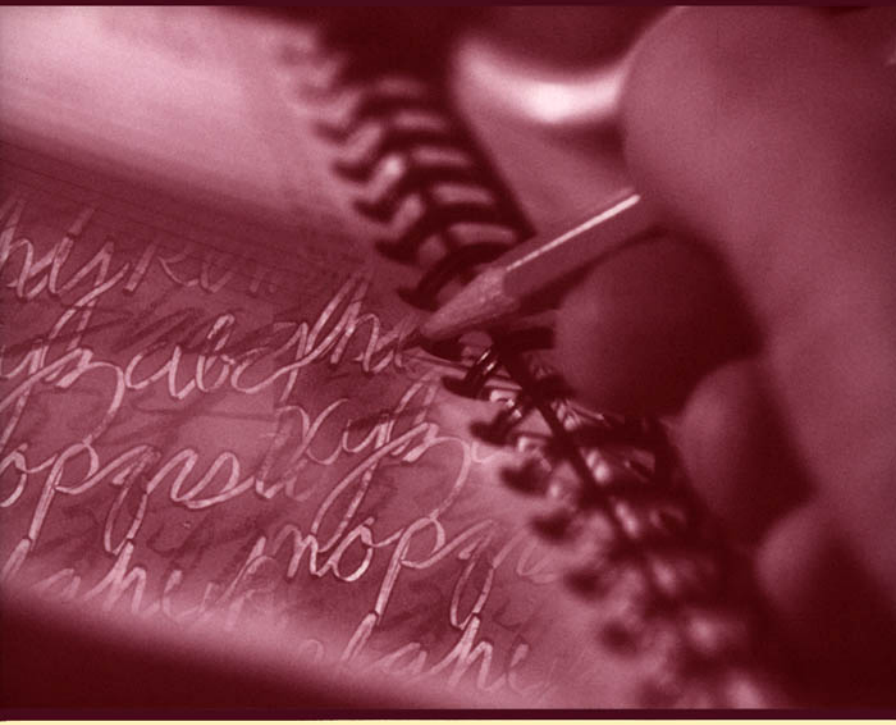
Second Edition

Teaching ESL Composition

Purpose, Process, and Practice



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TEACHING ESL COMPOSITION

PURPOSE, PROCESS, AND PRACTICE

Second Edition

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Chapter 7

Improving Accuracy in Student Writing: Error Treatment in the Composition Class

Questions for Reflection

- *Think about your own writing processes. At what point in your writing do you focus on the linguistic accuracy of your work?*
- *Of what strategies are you aware when you edit your own writing?*
- *How and where did you acquire the grammatical knowledge that you use to edit your work?*
- *How effective is your approach to editing your own writing? If it is effective, why do you think so? If it does not always work, what might improve it?*
- *What do you find most challenging about giving students feedback on their language errors (grammar, word choice, spelling, mechanics, and so on)?*
- *What ideas do you have about the best way or ways to help ESL students focus on editing their written work? Are these ideas congruent with your own editing process? Why or why not?*

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ERROR CORRECTION AND GRAMMAR TEACHING IN THE WRITING CLASS

Most writing theorists and instructors would agree that process-oriented pedagogies have greatly enhanced the outcomes of both L1 and L2 composition instruction. However, although students may be much better at idea generation and revision than they once were, ESL student papers may nonetheless contain excessive grammatical and lexical inaccuracies by the standards of English-speaking academic readers. Among ESL professionals it is understood that L2 acquisition is a process that takes time and that an expectation of perfect papers, even from advanced students, is unrealistic. Other readers of ESL student writing, however, often demand a high level of formal accuracy. Because of these realities and because ESL teachers will not always be there to assist their students, writing instructors need to help their students develop and improve their editing skills.

Before the advent of process-oriented instruction in ESL literacy instruction, teacher feedback to second language writing students often was excessively concerned with eradicating student errors (Applebee, 1981; Zamel, 1985). Often, that feedback was notably unsuccessful in helping to reduce error frequency in subsequent student writing (see Truscott, 1996, for a review). However, as process-oriented practices, with their emphasis on student writers' ideas and individual writing processes, achieved widespread acceptance, some instructors swung to the opposite extreme, giving little or no attention to the morphosyntactic or lexical accuracy of students' final products (Horowitz, 1986a). Zamel (1982) has reminded us that

> engaging students in the process of composing [does not eliminate] our obligation to upgrade their linguistic competencies.... If, however, students learn that writing is a process through which they can explore and discover their thoughts and ideas, then product is likely to improve as well. (p. 207)

Some L2 scholars (Eskey, 1983; Horowitz, 1986a) immediately raised questions about whether fervent adherence to process approaches would meet the needs of L2 writers, who are grappling simultaneously with second language acquisition and the development of their literacy skills. Those ESL writing teachers trained in process pedagogies also found that students' errors "were not

magically disappearing as the sure result of a more enlightened process and view of writing" (Ferris, 2002b, p. xi). Worse, they "helplessly watched some of [their] own students fail the course exit exam and the university's writing proficiency exam" (Ferris, 2002a, p. 6). Thus, instructors in the late 1980s and early 1990s began seeking better answers about techniques and strategies to help students improve the accuracy of their writing while working within a process-oriented paradigm (see chapter 1). These questions led to the publication of various "how-to" articles, books, and chapters for teachers (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Ferris, 1995c, 2002b; Frodesen, 1991; Frodesen & Holten, 2003; Reid, 1998b), editing handbooks specifically authored for ESL writers (Ascher, 1993; Fox, 1992; Lane & Lange, 1999; Raimes, 1992), and novel primary research on the effects of error correction, grammar instruction, and strategy training (see Ferris, 2002b; 2003b for reviews).

A new era in the debate surrounding error treatment in the larger process–product conversation was ushered in by a review essay published in *Language Learning* by Truscott (1996). In his article, Truscott argued strongly for the abolition of grammar correction in L2 writing courses. The appearance of Truscott's article led to a published debate in 1999 in the *Journal of Second Language Writing* (Ferris, 1999a; Truscott, 1999; see also Ferris, 2004), spurring new research efforts that are ongoing.

Still, for most teachers, students, and readers of L2 writing, the "debate" is, quite literally, academic. They know that L2 student writers have gaps in morphological, syntactic, and lexical knowledge that are more pronounced than those of L1 writers. They also know that most L2 students have not had enough exposure to the language (especially written English) to have developed intuitions that match those of their native speaker (NS) counterparts. They know that the resulting errors students make in their writing may be serious (interfering with the message) and stigmatizing (irritating to a NS academic audience). In short, they know that ESL student writers need expert help in improving the linguistic accuracy of their texts. The remainder of this chapter is therefore devoted to reviewing the questions concerning error treatment, grammar instruction, and strategy training for L2 writers. We also aim to offer practical suggestions based on our best guesses about how to approach these challenging tasks derived from the existing research base and from our own experiences as teachers. However, because we definitely do not wish

to argue that error treatment should be the only or the primary concern of an L2 writing course, we conclude this chapter by proposing ways of integrating these concerns with other dimensions of literacy education.

ERROR CORRECTION: QUESTIONS, ISSUES, AND OPTIONS

The following section addresses eight core questions that reflect the concerns of researchers and teachers regarding the practice of formal error treatment. Figure 7.1 encapsulates these questions.

Does Error Feedback Help Students At All?

The most pressing question to ask of the research base is the one raised by Truscott (1996): Is error feedback harmful or helpful? In his review, Truscott argued that: the existing research base provides no evidence that "grammar correction"[1] ever helps any students, that a number of "practical problems" (teacher incompetence, student inattention, and so on) render error correction a futile exercise, and that time spent on error correction is actually harmful because it takes energy and attention away from more important issues (i.e., student ideas) in writing courses.

1. Does error feedback help students at all?
2. What is an error? Should we mark for "errors" or "style"?
3. What kinds of errors do ESL writers most typically make?
4. Should error feedback be *selective* or *comprehensive*?
5. Should error feedback focus on *larger* or smaller *categories* or types?
6. Should feedback be *direct* or *indirect*?
7. Should errors be *labeled* or *located*?
8. *Where in the text* should error feedback be given?

FIG. 7.1. Questions about error feedback.

However, contrary to Truscott's (1996) assertion, empirical evidence strongly suggests that error feedback can help students, both in the short and long term. In the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, for instance, findings show that adult acquirers in particular need their errors made salient and explicit to them so they can avoid fossilization and continue developing their target language competence (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1998; Ellis et al., 2001; James, 1998; Lightbown, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Tomasello & Herron, 1989). In studies of error correction in L2 writing, we find evidence favorable to systematic error treatment in two strands of research: (a) studies that compare the accuracy of texts generated by students who received error correction with that of the texts of students who did not (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Kepner, 1991)[2] and (b) studies that measure increases in linguistic accuracy in student texts over time (Ferris, 1995a, 1997; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986).[3] (See Ferris, 2004, for an in-depth analysis of this issue; see also Ferris, 2002b; 2003b)

What Is an Error? Should Teachers Mark for "Errors" or "Style"?

Disputes concerning errors have often centered on the question of whether it is fair or accurate to label the non–target-like production of L2 learners as "errors," or whether such forms should more properly be considered natural consequences of the evolving stages of learner interlanguage (Corder, 1967; James, 1998; Truscott, 1996). Nevertheless, many teachers would likely be comfortable with a working definition of errors such as the following: Errors consist of morphological, syntactic, and lexical deviations from the grammatical rules of a language that violate the intuitions of NSs.[4] Issues of "style," on the other hand, relate more to the teacher's sense that a particular word or phrase might flow more smoothly or idiomatically in a text than to any violation of underlying or universal grammatical patterns. With the exception of very advanced, highly proficient L2 writers, it probably is both more urgent and more productive to focus on errors rather than style, and specifically to focus on patterned and rule-governed errors that can be addressed constructively through instruction and strategy training.

What Kinds of Errors Do ESL Writers Most Typically Make?

Whereas NS composition students also produce errors in their texts, the errors produced by L2 writers tend to be distinct from those of their NS counterparts. For instance, ESL writers frequently struggle with a range of issues related to verbs, (e.g., errors in verb tense, errors in form including target-like formation of tenses, passive constructions, modal constructions, and so forth) and subject–verb agreement. Rarely if ever do NS students make analogous verb errors, with the exception perhaps of inappropriate use (or avoidance) of relatively obscure verb inflections such as the future perfect progressive. Typically, L2 writers also wrestle with understanding the properties of English nouns. Specifically, they may not grasp distinctions between the various subclasses of nouns (count/noncount, abstract, collective, and so on) or their implications for plural or possessive endings, use of articles and other determiners, or subject-verb agreement.[5]

It is important to note that ESL students produce a range of errors depending on the structure of their L1s and the extent and nature of their previous exposure to and instruction in English (Ferris, 1999b, 2003a; Leki, 1992; Reid, 1998a). Particularly in heterogeneous ESL classrooms in English-speaking countries, a teacher may encounter one group of students that makes frequent verb tense errors, another that struggles with the English determiner system, and still another that has trouble with word order. There may be no overlap across groups. It is thus extremely important for L2 writing teachers to take time to analyze the error patterns and needs of individual students and of each new group of student writers, instead of making assumptions about what "all ESL writers need."[6]

Should Error Feedback Be Selective or Comprehensive?

The next question to consider in providing error feedback is whether to mark only some errors or all of them. Arguments in favor of the former approach (selective correction) are compelling. It is less overwhelming to teachers and students and allows for prioritization of the most serious, frequent patterns of errors made by individual students. This option is thought to facilitate progress toward the development of successful

self-editing strategies (Bates, et al., 1993; Ferris, 1995c; Hendrickson, 1980; Lane & Lange, 1999; Reid, 1998a, 2002). Arguments against this position come from students themselves. Survey reports indicate that students prefer all of their errors to be identified so that they do not "miss anything" (Komura, 1999; Leki, 1991a; Rennie, 2000). Some indicators have been supplied by SLA researchers, who have suggested that leaving errors uncorrected can lead to fossilization (Scarcella, 1996).

The question of selective versus comprehensive error correction may also rest on the stage of the writing process at which the feedback is given. For some composition researchers and many instructors, it is axiomatic that editing for language errors should be postponed until the end of the writing process (Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985). As a corollary, proponents of multidrafting maintain that teachers should withhold error feedback until the penultimate or final drafts. The concern is that students will prematurely attend to form instead of continuing to develop their ideas, and "that students cannot attend to multiple concerns at the same time" (Frodesen & Holten, 2003, p. 145). However, the empirical evidence available actually suggests otherwise (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1997), namely, that students are capable of addressing language and content issues simultaneously. One researcher has even argued that an excessively hands-off approach to error feedback may be harmful to students' progress (Shih, 1998).

According to Frodesen and Holten (2003), "research . . . suggests that it is in the best interest of L2 writers to attend to language issues consistently throughout the drafting process" (p. 145). They are careful to note, however, that their conclusion does not necessarily imply that teachers should mark errors on every single paper, but rather that the teacher may wish to use a range of strategies through a multidraft process to focus students appropriately on selected forms. For example, an instructor may wish to mark or comment selectively on several major patterns of error in a preliminary student draft, knowing that the content of the paper still may change a great deal, but wanting nonetheless to give some language-related advice. On a final draft of a paper, one that has been graded or will not be further revised, the instructor may wish to mark all remaining errors so the writer has that information available for charting (discussed later in this chapter) or simply for future reference.

If an instructor opts for selective error feedback, the question of which errors to mark then arises. Experts have suggested that

teachers focus on patterns of error that are global or serious (interfering with the comprehensibility of a text), frequent (relative to other error types and considering percentages of correct and incorrect forms in obligatory contexts), and stigmatizing (more typical of ESL writers than of NS students and potentially more offensive to NS academic audiences). Take, for instance, a hypothetical student paper with 30 obligatory contexts for verbs to be marked morphologically for tense, aspect, or voice. The writer either omits the required morpheme or uses an incorrect form in 10 of the 30 contexts. This frequency of ungrammaticality would exemplify an error that is both frequent and stigmatizing. Whether or not errors are serious or global depends on the coherence of the paper and whether the writer successfully indicates time frame, active/passive voice, and completion of actions and states (aspect) in other ways.

Should Error Feedback Focus on Larger or Smaller Categories or Types?

With the general features that are troublesome for ESL writers identified as well as principles for prioritizing errors on which to focus, another question arises: Is it most helpful to student writers to give feedback on discrete categories of error (e.g., verb tense vs. verb form), or simply to indicate that there is a problem within a broad category (verbs). On this issue, ESL writing textbooks and editing handbooks are split. Some focus on 15 to 20 smaller categories (Lane & Lange, 1999; Raimes, 1992), whereas others select 5 or 6 (Ascher, 1993; Fox, 1992).

The argument in favor of narrower categories maintains that students can be provided with a more learnable, "bite-sized" set of rules to master, topics that can be covered more easily in classroom minilessons, and practice exercises that can be integrated into a literacy course syllabus. On the other hand, we often detect overlap among these narrower categories, and even experienced teachers disagree about whether an error should be classified as "verb tense" or "verb form," whether a noun phrase is ill-formed because it needs a plural ending or an article, or whether a lexical error reflects a problem of spelling or word choice. Thus, an elaborate marking system of 15 to 20 error types or codes may lead to instructor errors, may overwhelm teachers, and may confuse and discourage students. Figure 7.2 provides examples of student errors marked for micro- and macrolevel error types.

The student text excerpt below has been marked in two ways: (1) Errors in five larger categories marked; (2) Errors in smaller, more discrete categories.

Option A (Larger)

WW V/WW
Lying is considered dishonest, cheating, or not telling the **true**, but can anyone **tells** that he or she never
V SS
ever **lie**? Of **course not,** "everyone lies." I used to lie, and I cannot guarantee that I will not lie again in
WW
the future. Many people lie because they want to **make** fun while others lie to take advantage of someone
WW SS
else. However, lying is harmful **while** the person we lie to discovers that we are telling a lie. Despite **of**
WW
that, all lies are not **necessary** bad or wrong.

WW SS
We sometimes lie because we want to make people happy. I lied to a girl, **for** she **would** get mad.
V WW V
I met a girl four years ago. She **is** very **quite**, but her friend, Mindy, **likes** to talk a lot. I liked Mindy
WW
because she and I had a very good conversation. **While** Mindy left, I told that girl that I liked her more
WW
than Mindy because Mindy talked too much. I also told her that most **quite** girls are polite and honest, so
SS
so she must be a very good girl. Although I really **didn't her**, I lied to make her happy.

KEY: *V* = verb errors; *WW* = word choice/form errors; *SS* =sentence structure errors.

Option B (Smaller)

WF VF/WW
Lying is considered dishonest, cheating, or not telling the **true**, but can anyone **tells** that he or she never
VF RO
ever **lie**? Of **course not,** "everyone lies." I used to lie, and I cannot guarantee that I will not lie again in
WW
the future. Many people lie because they want to **make** fun while others lie to take advantage of someone
WW SS
else. However, lying is harmful **while** the person we lie to discovers that we are telling a lie. Despite **of**
WF
that, all lies are not **necessary** bad or wrong.

WW SS
We sometimes lie because we want to make people happy. I lied to a girl, **for** she **would** get mad.
VT SP VT
I met a girl four years ago. She **is** very **quite**, but her friend, Mindy, **likes** to talk a lot. I liked Mindy
WW
because she and I had a very good conversation. **While** Mindy left, I told that girl that I liked her more
SP
that I liked her more than Mindy because Mindy talked too much. I also told her that most **quite** girls are
SS
polite and honest, so she must be a very good girl. Although I really **didn't her**, I lied to make her happy.

KEY: *VT*= verb tense; *VF*= verb form; *WW*= word choice; *WF*= word form errors;
SS= sentence structure errors;*SP*= spelling.

FIG. 7.2. Error marking strategies: Larger and smaller categories.

Should Feedback Be Direct or Indirect?

One of the most important decisions in error correction is whether teachers should provide direct or indirect feedback. With direct feedback, the teacher simply provides a target-like form for the student writer (or a suggested correction, if more than one is possible or if it is not entirely clear what the student intended to express). Indirect feedback, on the other hand, provides students with an indication that an error has been made, but requires the student to self-correct.

Most experts agree that indirect feedback clearly has the most potential for helping students to continue developing their L2 proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge. Students themselves, when asked about error feedback preferences, seem to realize that they will learn more from indirect feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Komura, 1999; Leki, 1991a; Rennie, 2000). However, we suggest that direct correction can play a productive role among lower-level students who are unable to self-edit even when an error is called to their attention. Direct correction also is appropriate for selected idiomatic lexical errors (e.g., collocations involving wrongly selected prepositions) and perhaps when a student text will not be further revised and the teacher wishes to call students' attention to remaining errors. Figure 7.3 presents samples of direct and indirect feedback supplied by a teacher on a brief piece of student writing.

If a teacher opts for indirect feedback as the "default" mechanism, a further correction option to consider is whether the errors should be labeled as to error type (with verbal labels or correction codes) or whether they should simply be located, with the error circled or highlighted but no further information provided. The argument in favor of the labeling option is that an indication of error type might elicit for students previously learned rules that they can then apply to the self-editing task. The opposite argument is that the less explicit option (locating) requires even more effort on the part of the student writer, who must not only figure out the correct form, but also determine what is ill-formed in the first place.

In deciding about labeling or locating, teachers have several questions to consider. First, what are the students' backgrounds? Are they "eye learners" (e.g., international students educated in their home countries who learned English grammar through formal instruction) or "ear learners" (long-term immigrants or even U.S.-born bilinguals who have never undergone formal

Option A: Direct Feedback

truth say
Lying is considered dishonest, cheating, or not telling the **true**, but can anyone **tells** that he or she never
lies
ever **lie**? Of **course not,** "everyone lies." I used to lie, and I cannot guarantee that I will not lie again in
have
the future. Many people lie because they want to **make** fun while others lie to take advantage of someone
when
else. However, lying is harmful **while** the person we lie to discovers that we are telling a lie. Despite **of**
necessarily
that, all lies are not **necessary** bad or wrong.

so not
We sometimes lie because we want to make people happy. I lied to a girl **for** she **would** get mad.
was quiet liked
I met a girl four years ago. She **is** very **quite**, but her friend, Mindy, **likes** to talk a lot. I liked Mindy
After/When
because she and I had a very good conversation. **While** Mindy left, I told that girl that I liked her more
quiet
than Mindy because Mindy talked too much. I also told her that most **quite** girls are polite and honest, so
like
she must be a very good girl. Although I really **didn't her**, I lied to make her happy.

Option B: Indirect Feedback (error location)

Lying is considered dishonest, cheating, or not telling the **true**, but can anyone **tells** that he or she never ever **lie**? Of **course not,** "everyone lies." I used to lie, and I cannot guarantee that I will not lie again in the future. Many people lie because they want to **make** fun while others lie to take advantage of someone else. However, lying is harmful **while** the person we lie to discovers that we are telling a lie. Despite **of** that, all lies are not **necessary** bad or wrong.

We sometimes lie because we want to make people happy. I lied to a girl, **for** she **would** get mad. I met a girl four years ago. She **is** very **quite**, but her friend, Mindy, **likes** to talk a lot. I liked Mindy because she and I had a very good conversation. **While** Mindy left, I told that girl that I liked her more than Mindy because Mindy talked too much. I also told her that most **quite** girls are polite and honest, so she must be a very good girl. Although I really **didn't her**, I lied to make her happy.

Option C: Indirect Feedback (Verbal End Note)

*As you revise, be sure to check your **verbs** to see if they are in the right tense (past or present) and check your **word choice**. I've highlighted some examples of errors in the first two paragraphs to show you what I mean, but there are others throughout your paper.*

FIG. 7.3. Direct and indirect feedback.

instruction in English outside an English-speaking country and whose exposure to the language has been more naturalistic than classroom based)? The former group might benefit from rule reminders or codes that will jog their memories of formal grammar instruction. Simple location of errors might not provide enough information or elicit enough implicit knowledge for them to self-correct successfully. In contrast, the latter group may have a much

stronger "felt sense" of the language, much like NSs, but very little grasp of metalinguistic terminology or access to learned rules. To put the problem another way, "whereas an international student may access a language rule to identify and explain an ungrammatical form, an immigrant ESL student intuits that the form 'sounds wrong' much as a native English speaker might" (Frodesen & Holten, 2003, p. 150).

A related concern involves where to provide corrections. Although many teachers provide direct or indirect in-text feedback at the error location, some opt for check marks in the margin (i. e., "There's an error somewhere in this line, but you have to find it yourself"), or even for verbal end comments about patterns of error, with or without some in-text errors underlined for illustrative purposes (e.g., "You have a lot of missing verb tense endings. I've underlined some examples on the first page, but there are others throughout the essay.") Students tend to prefer point-of-error feedback, but if a teacher is purposefully moving students toward becoming autonomous self-editors, providing less explicit feedback may be an appropriate instructional strategy in some cases (Ferris, 1995c, 1997; Robb et al., 1986).

In short, the task of providing error feedback on student writing is complex, involving teacher decisions about what constitutes an "error," which errors to mark and how, what specific groups and individuals need most, and how error correction fits in with other classroom instructional choices. Furthermore, it is important for teachers not only to consider these "what, how, who, and why" questions, but also to make sure that they are adequately prepared themselves to assess the accuracy of student writing and to provide meaningful guidance for their students. Finally, in addition to providing error feedback on student texts, the "treatment of error" in L2 student writing also may involve in-class grammar instruction and certainly should incorporate strategy training to help students move toward autonomy in editing their own work. It is to these latter two topics that we turn next.

GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION: RESEARCH AND SUGGESTIONS

Disagreement exists among L1 and L2 composition specialists about whether formal grammar instruction is necessary or effective for improving the accuracy of student writing. Over the past

several decades, L1 researchers have consistently challenged the practice of teaching grammar and punctuation rules in composition courses. The basic argument is that student writers already have an intuitive sense of the rules of their language. What is needed, rather, are opportunities to put them into practice: "Language cannot be learned in isolation but only by manipulating it in meaningful contexts" (Frodesen & Holten, 2003, p. 143; see also Hartwell, 1985; Shaughnessy, 1977).

In addition, L2 scholars and teachers have questioned the efficacy of grammar instruction, noting that "the return on grammar instruction is often disappointing. Teachers find that even when a grammatical feature has been covered and practiced, students may not use it accurately in their own writing" (Frodesen & Holten, 2003, p. 142). It also has been noted that L2 writers do not have the same "felt sense" of correctness nor intuitive grasp of the grammatical rules of English, so formal instruction may be more important for them (Frodesen & Holten, 2003). Moreover, SLA researchers have increasingly argued that, particularly for adult L2 learners, focus on form is not only beneficial but necessary (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2002). Finally, limited empirical evidence points to a positive role for supplemental grammar instruction in L2 writing instruction, which can work in tandem with error correction to facilitate increased accuracy over time (see Ferris, 2003b, Ch. 3, for a review). To summarize,

> in light of both new research findings and the inherent differences in L1 and L2 writers' literacy development, it is clear that ESL writing instructors have a role to play in making writers aware of language form. Overt and systematic grammar instruction can help students access the grammar rules that they know and use their intuitions about the language judiciously. (Frodesen & Holten, 2003, p. 144)

Principles for Grammar Instruction in an L2 Writing Class

From the evolving scholarship in composition studies and SLA, it is clear that traditional, decontextualized grammar instruction (learning rules deductively, engaging in practice with exercises, and so on) is not effective in promoting long-term development in written accuracy. Rather, supplemental grammar instruction should be carefully integrated with other elements of the literacy syllabus, responsive to specific student needs, meaningful, and contextualized. With these criteria in mind, we offer principles

and practices for teachers who wish to provide grammar instruction for their L2 writing students.

A Writing Class Is Not a Grammar Class. It is critical for teachers not to lose perspective on the relative importance of grammar instruction. A teacher can easily become overwhelmed by the range, depth, and urgency of student needs as to accuracy and attention to form. Many high-quality, in-depth ESL grammar textbooks are available, and it can be tempting to start teaching through one of these. Nonetheless, we must remember that many other important aims and processes must be incorporated into effective literacy instruction (Figs. 3.3–3.5). We must also avoid the temptation to neglect those priorities in favor of intensive grammar instruction. Grammar instruction should be thoughtfully integrated with other phases of the writing and editing process, as we argue later (see also Ferris, 1995c).

Grammar Instruction Should Start With Awareness of Student Needs. It can be tempting to address grammar issues by consulting lists of "common ESL errors" or by working through the topics in an editing or grammar handbook (see Ferris, 1995c; 2002b for examples and discussion). However, students' needs for grammar instruction vary dramatically depending on their level of L2 proficiency, their L1 background, and especially the formal or informal nature of their prior exposure to English. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to spend time at the beginning of a course assessing students' knowledge and linguistic gaps. Teachers can undertake this task by conducting a error analysis based on an initial writing sample, perhaps paired with a grammar knowledge pretest or questionnaire about what students already know (see Ferris, 2002b, pp. 117–122 for sample materials). The teacher then should target areas for explicit instruction based on awareness of individual and collective needs.

Grammar Instruction Should Be Brief and Narrowly Focused. Most L1 and L2 composition experts advocate the use of the minilesson for classroom grammar presentations, as well as other types of writing instruction (Atwell, 1998; Ferris, 2002b; Weaver, 1996). As their name implies, minilessons are brief (thus addressing the first principle of not allowing grammar teaching to overshadow other priorities) and can be developed to target specific areas of student need. Minilessons also are beneficial because they focus intensively on restricted areas of grammatical knowledge, allowing students to grasp, practice, and apply

manageable chunks of material. For instance, a minilesson on verb tenses might focus on shifts between past and present tense in narrative discourse or between the functions of the past simple and the present perfect, rather than present all 12 tense-aspect combinations in English (some of which are rarely used in written discourse).

In addition to being short (say between 10 and 30 minutes, including practice or application activities) and narrowly focused, effective grammar minilessons typically include the following components in some form:

Discovery Activity: Identifying Modal Auxiliaries and Modal Verb Phrases

Directions

1. Highlight each modal or modal verb phrase in the passage below.
2. Use the table below to make a list of the modals and modal verb phrases.
3. Beside each modal, write down the type of modal being used. The first one is done for you.

Modal	Modal Verb Phrase	Modal Type
1. *Should*	*Should have seen*	*Advice*
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		

(1) Visitors should have seen the fabulous views of the Grand Canyon National Park last summer. (2) It's not too late to go. (3) Will you consider going there this summer? (4) Visitors should see the fabulous view of the canyon, and its beautifully colored walls. (5) The headquarters and Visitor Center is at the South Rim where visitors can find information about the park. (6) Visitors may drive along parts of the rim or hike down into the canyon on various trails. (7) Hikers must be sure to drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration as the weather can be extremely hot. (8) They also might carry extra food in case they become hungry while hiking on the trail. (9) Perhaps the best way to see the canyon is to float down the Colorado River on a rubber raft. (10) Seeing the canyon from this perspective is spectacular, but people who are afraid of whitewater should not take this trip since some of the Colorado River rapids are among the biggest in the world.

(Paragraph adapted from Lane & Lange, 1993, *Writing Clearly*, p. 61. Boston: Heinle.)

Note: This activity assumes prior knowledge of modal auxiliaries and their types. See Fig. 7.5.

FIG. 7.4. Sample discovery activity: Identifying modal auxiliaries and modal verb phrases.

- *Text analysis and discovery activities.* These activities allow students to observe and analyze how the target structure is used in natural discourse. Teachers often use authentic texts (professionally written literary or expository texts) and well-executed student texts as models for analysis.[7] For example, for a minilesson on article usage, a teacher might ask students to analyze a couple of paragraphs from a sample text by first identifying all the nouns; determining whether definite, indefinite, or zero articles are used in the noun phrases; and then discussing why those choices were made. Figure 7.4 provides an example of a text analysis exercise.
- *Brief deductive explanations of important terms and rules.* Whereas some instructors move students directly from inductive discovery activities to practice and application, it is important to remember that many students have more deductive, field-dependent learning styles and can become frustrated if they are not provided with a straightforward presentation of important terms and applicable rules. Narrowing down the information and presenting it in a way that students can quickly grasp is perhaps the most challenging aspect of developing a minilesson. We recommend keeping such presentations simple, introducing only a few rules, and perhaps including an "editing guide" offering a series of heuristic questions students can use to evaluate their own writing or the writing of peers. See Figure 7.5 for an example.
- *Practice and application activities.* An effective minilesson also includes opportunities for students to apply what they have learned through editing for errors in sample student texts, participating in peer editing workshops, and scrutinizing their own in-progress work. Probably the most overlooked application type is the minilesson focused on students' own writing, but this is arguably the most important. After all, if students are not expected to make a hands-on connection between what they have been taught and the writing they are producing, we would be, in a very real sense, repeating the mistakes of the earlier era of decontextualized grammar instruction, which never carried over to real-world language production. (See Fig. 7.6 for an example.)

Modal Auxiliaries

A. Basic Definitions and Introduction to Modal Auxiliaries

1. **Types of Auxiliaries.** As you have already learned, verb phrases are formed by using auxiliaries: words which "help" the verb. Auxiliaries come before verbs in the verb phrase. There are two types of auxiliaries: auxiliary verbs and modal auxiliaries.

Auxiliaries	*Modals*
be, do, have	*can could* *may might* *will would* *shall should (ought to)* *must (have to, need to)*

2. **Past vs. Present Form of Modal Verb Phrases:**
   EXAMPLE: *You should stop.* = Advice; in the present→talking about future
   EXAMPLE: *You should have stopped.* = Advice; in the present→talking about past
3. **Categories of Modals:**

Request:	*Will/would/can/could you open the door?*
Permission:	*May/might/can/could you open the door?*
Advice/Obligation:	*You must(have to,need to)/should (ought to) open the door.*
Ability:	*Can (be able to). She can (is able to) play the piano.*

B. Editing Guide. Four basic rules govern the use of modal auxiliaries:

Rule 1: Modal auxiliaries never take subject–verb agreement

Incorrect: *She may walks to the store.*
Correct: *She may walk to the store.*
Strategy: Make sure there's no -s attached to the verb in a modal verb phrase.

RULE 2: The next verb after a modal is always in its base form.

Incorrect: *I could taking the job.*
Correct: *I could take the job.*
Strategy: Make sure each verb is in its base form after the modal.

RULE 3: If a modal is used, it is always the first element in the verb phrase.

Incorrect: *She like would to go to the store.*
Correct: *She would like to go to the store.*
Strategy: Double-check the sequence in your verb phrase.

RULE 4: Standard English allows only one modal auxiliary per clause.

Incorrect: *They must could go out at night.*
Correct: *They must go out at night.*
Strategy: Pick the modal verb that makes the most sense for what idea you are trying to convey. For instance, the sentence, "they must go out at night," is a command; however, "they could go out at night" means they had permission to go out at night or they were able to go out at night.

FIG. 7.5. Sample deductive presentation: Modal auxiliaries.

Although the development of grammar minilessons can be challenging and time-consuming for a teacher, they can be highly effective in presenting important language content in ways that students can instantly grasp and apply. In addition, minilessons can be built on in two distinct ways. First, teachers may wish to take important form-focused topics (e.g., verb tenses,

Modal Auxiliary Application Activities

Practice Exercise 1

Directions. *In each sentence, decide if the modal auxiliary is correct (C) or incorrect (I). Cross out the incorrect part of the modal auxiliary verb phrase and write the correct word. The first one is done for you.*

1. ___ I must need to be home by midnight. **(correction: Use *must* OR *need*, but not both!)**
2. ___ She should walks more carefully.
3. ___ You should be more careful.
4. ___ Should you please take off your hat?
5. ___ You can should see the view from here.
6. ___ He might watching the game tonight.
7. ___ Did you answered the question?
8. ___ He should notices what the sign says.
9. ___ May you open the door, please?
10. ___ How could I helped you?

Practice Exercise

Directions. *Read the following paragraph and cross out any incorrect modal auxiliaries or verb forms used with modal auxiliaries. Write the correct answer in its place.*

Life was hard for me when I first came to this country. I was a new bride and had to adapted to my new environment. I know I should being more adventurous, but I didn't want to go outside by myself. I expect life might be better for you. You should taking my advice and be more open to the world around you. You not might think that this is original advice, but you must follow your dreams. You are the only person who can finds your dreams.

[Exercise adapted from Raimes (1993), *How English Works*, p. 122. New York: St. Martin's.]

Practice Exercise

Directions. *Read through the latest draft of your essay, and complete the following three tasks:*

1. Highlight *all* verb phrases.
2. Circle any phrases that contain *modal auxiliaries.*
3. Using the Editing Guide (see Fig. 7.5), check to see if there are any errors in your verb phrases that contain modals. If you find any, try to correct them.
4. Now look again at the verb phrases you highlighted and see if any might be *improved or strengthened* by adding a modal auxiliary. Rewrite the sentences to include the modal you have chosen. (Don't forget to change any verb tense endings, if needed!)

FIG. 7.6. Sample application activities: Modal auxiliaries.

article usage, clause boundaries, subject–verb agreement, and so forth) and break them down in a continuing series of minilessons that uses earlier lessons as scaffolding for new material. Second, teachers can tie the minilessons to other aspects of the feedback and revision process by marking student papers for specific structures covered in minilessons, and by requiring students to chart their progress in mastering these rules and structures.

Individualized or Small Group Instruction Should Be Considered for Specific Topics That Do Not Apply to the Whole Class. Depending on the demographics of a particular writing class, a teacher may well find that not all grammar topics are relevant to the entire group. We often find this diversity of needs in secondary and postsecondary ESL courses in an English-speaking setting, which may include students from a wide range of L1 backgrounds. Such courses also may serve traditional ESL students (international students and recent immigrants), as well as long-term residents. For example, one of the authors, while teaching a recent ESL freshman composition course, found through a diagnostic error analysis that the average number of "verb" errors (including errors in both tense and form) was four, and that the range was 0 to 7. In other words, verbs were the most serious problem for some students, whereas other students had no need for instruction on verbs at all.

A teacher encountering this dynamic has several choices. One is to design and deliver minilessons for the whole group by identifying the most prevalent areas of collective need, recognizing that these lessons may be more relevant for some students than for others. However, as the lessons are "mini," they will not tax the students' patience excessively. Another option is to provide minilessons to smaller groups of students, outside class time or while the rest of the students work on something else. Finally, a teacher may opt entirely or partially for individualized "instruction" by providing each student with personalized feedback on his or her most significant patterns of error, and by referring students to specific sections of a grammar or editing handbook or to handouts and exercises provided by the teacher (see Ferris, 1995c, and Ferris, 2002b, pp. 101–102 for ideas on selecting resources for self-study). Obviously, a "one-size-fits-all" approach to these challenges is out of the question. Teachers must determine for themselves what model of delivery works best for a particular group of students.

To summarize, we believe that in most instances, ESL literacy teachers should carefully consider providing classroom instruction on language issues, in addition to giving students feedback on their errors. Whereas such instruction need not, and should not, consume extensive amounts of class time, judicious selection, presentation, and application of grammar points may be

extremely important for students' continued language and literacy development.

STRATEGY TRAINING FOR SELF-EDITING

We previously alluded to the controversy among teachers and researchers concerning whether teacher error correction and overt grammar instruction offer measurable benefits for L2 student writers. In contrast, experts agree[8] that L2 writers need strategy training for the purpose of becoming independent, autonomous self-editors. We all recognize that linguistic accuracy is, in fact, one essential component (among many) of effective writing. Furthermore, because they lack native-speaker intuition and have less had extensive exposure to the language, L2 writers may struggle with accurate written production more than NS writers do. The errors of L2 writers also may be stigmatizing and thus harmful to them, at least with some academic and professional audiences. Finally, we, their writing instructors, will not always be there to guide them. Thus, we need to help these students learn to help themselves.

Techniques for Teaching Editing Skills in the Writing Class

Most modern researchers advocate an indirect discovery approach for teaching editing skills to ESL students. Although the goal of teaching students to become "independent self-editors" (Lane & Lange, 1993, p. xix) is clearly a crucial one, students at beginning to intermediate levels of English proficiency may not have the linguistic skills to monitor their own written products successfully (Jones, 1985). In a general discussion of error production and correction in second language acquisition, Brown (2000) suggested that learners pass through successive stages in developing an ability to recognize and correct their own errors, ranging from the "random error stage," in which learners have no systematic idea about a given structure, to the "stabilization stage," in which learners make relatively few errors and can self-correct. Many ESL writing students find themselves at an in-between stage where their errors are systematic, and where they can self-correct some errors, but not all—if they are pointed

Editing Activities

A. Controlled Writing Exercise

Instructions. *Change the paragraph into past tense. The first sentence is done for you.*

My wife gets up early in the morning. She hates to get up in the morning. She has to get dressed quickly to catch an early bus to work. I go to work later, and I drive my car. She doesn't have much time for breakfast, so she just has a cup of coffee when she gets to work. I have a bowl of cereal and fruit before I go to work. I understand why my wife doesn't like mornings? (Adapted from Fox, 1992)

Beginning of Past tense Paragraph:

My wife got up earlier in the morning than I did.

B. Guided Writing Exercise

Instructions. *You just read a paragraph about a man and his wife getting ready for work in the morning. Now write a paragraph about what* ***you*** *did this morning. Answer the questions to get ideas for your paragraph.*

- Did you get up early or late?
- Did you have a lot of time or did you have to hurry?
- How did you get to school? Did you walk, ride a bike, drive a car, or ride a bus?
- Did you eat breakfast? Where (at home or at school)?
- What did you eat for breakfast?
- Do you usually enjoy mornings?

Follow-up. Now change your paragraph about this morning into one about your usual morning.

C. Dictocomp

Procedure. *Use a paragraph like the one in Part A. Read the paragraph aloud several times at normal speed. Then write the key words on the board in sequence (see following list for an example) and ask the students to rewrite the paragraph as they remember it, using the words on the board.*

KEY WORDS

hates	*bus*	*breakfast*	*understand*
get up	*later*	*coffee*	
get dressed	*car*	*cereal*	

(Activities developed from suggestions in Brown, 2001)

FIG. 7.7. Sample exercises for beginning L2 writers.

out by someone else. It is a rare student in an L2 writing course who can find and correct his or her own errors without any assistance from a teacher or other more expert source (see Fathman & Whalley, 1990, and Ferris & Roberts, 2001, for empirical evidence on this question).

Students with an emergent ability to recognize and correct their errors most likely need types of intervention that differ from those needed by more proficient students. Brown (2001) and Frodesen (1991) suggested that the types of writing within the capability of low-level students include copying (of model texts and their own teacher-corrected compositions), controlled and guided writing exercises involving manipulation of various syntactic structures, and dictocomps (Fig. 7.7).

As students progress in their acquisition of English syntax, morphology, and lexis, as well as their formal learning of more complex discursive conventions, they can be given more responsibility for correcting their own errors. An error correction system such as the one advocated in two companion volumes on editing (Bates et al.,1993; Lane & Lange, 1993, 1999) may be useful for this intermediate level of editing proficiency. In these texts, teachers and students learn a system of marking papers for different types of errors and are encouraged to prioritize and keep track of their error patterns. However, depending on students' prior educational experience, especially their English language development, systems such as these may need to be adapted to accommodate students' relative knowledge of formal grammar terminology.

Once students have progressed to a point at which they can either correct a variety of errors when they are pointed out or find and correct errors themselves, teachers can take several steps to help them move further toward autonomy. With this approach, advanced ESL students can be taught over several phases during the writing course to become self-sufficient as editors (Fig. 7.8).

Teaching Editing Over a 15-Week Semester

***Phase 1 (Weeks 1–3)**: FOCUSING STUDENTS ON FORM*

Goals

- Students learn to recognize the importance of improving editing skills
- Students begin to identify their own "sources of error."

Activities

- Students write a diagnostic essay; teacher prepares a report of major weaknesses and indicates what sort of grade the student is likely to receive if such problems persist to the end of the term;
- Students examine sample sentences and essays for the purpose of noting what comprehensibility problems are rooted in sentence–level errors.

***Phase 2 (Weeks 4–10)**: TRAINING STUDENTS TO RECOGNIZE MAJOR ERROR TYPES*

Goals and Activities

- Students understand and identify major error types in sample essays
- Students "peer edit"
- Students keep written records of the major types of errors they make, turned in with writing projects
- Instruction on major sources of error is given in class, lab, or through independent study, as necessary.

***Phase 3 (Weeks 11–15)**: HELPING STUDENTS TO FIND AND CORRECT THEIR OWN ERRORS*

Goals and Activities

- Students edit their own essays and chart their progress
- Instruction on major sources of error continues.

(Source: Ferris, 1995c, p. 46)

FIG. 7.8. Student self-editing process.

Phase 1: Focusing Students on Form. The intent of this stage is to help students realize the importance of improving their editing skills. According to Ferris (1995c), some teachers assume that ESL writers focus excessively on grammatical form at the expense of developing and organizing their ideas. However, many ESL students have little interest in editing their written production. Such writers may find editing tedious, may not see it as important, or may have become overly dependent on experts (i.e., teachers, tutors, and so on) to correct their work for them. "Thus, a crucial step in teaching students to become good editors is to convince them of the necessity of doing so" (Ferris, 1995c, p. 18).

We recommend several strategies for raising students' awareness of the importance of editing in general, and of addressing the expectations of a socioliterate audience (see chapters 1 through 4). The first strategy involves setting classroom tasks in which writers look at sentences or a short student text containing a variety of editing problems (Fig. 7.9). Another useful strategy for convincing students of the necessity to develop editing skills is to give them a diagnostic essay assignment early in the term and provide them with comprehensive feedback about their writing, including detailed information about their editing weaknesses, so that they have specific grammatical features on which to focus throughout the semester (see Ferris, 2002b, pp. 78–85 for a more detailed discussion of this "consciousness-raising" stage).

Phase 2: Providing Strategy Training. Once the importance of accuracy and the development of self-editing strategies has been established, the teacher should share with students

Editing Exercise

Instructions. *Read a sample student paper and look at the course grading criteria (especially the criteria for a "4" [passing] paper and a "3" [failing] paper). Discuss the following questions with your instructor and classmates:*

1. Considering *errors only*, if this paper were written for the final, do you think the student would pass the class? Why or why not?
2. What are the most frequent *types* of errors you see in this essay?

Note: This exercise is adapted from Ferris (2002b, pp. 133–134).

FIG. 7.9. Consciousness-raising exercise with sample student paper.

both general principles of SLA and specific strategies for self-editing. As to the former, students should be relieved to hear that adult language learning takes time and occurs in stages, that errors are a normal part of the acquisition process (comparisons with child language acquisition are helpful here), that aspects of English grammar are idiosyncratic and full of troublesome exceptions (thus lightening some guilt they may feel about "carelessness" or inability to master certain structures), and that it is neither possible nor necessary to expect that they will produce perfect, error-free papers by the end of a writing course.

Many ESL literacy materials and resources for teachers provide lists of strategies that students should consider in editing their texts. These include recommendations such as "read your paper aloud," "run the spell-check" (but see chapter 9 for some caveats and warnings about this practice), and so forth. One of the most important editing strategies that students can learn, however, involves making separate, narrowly focused passes through texts to look for targeted error types or patterns. These categories may vary depending on the teacher's perception of student needs. However, these error forms should be selected from frequent, serious, and stigmatizing error types. Students are sensitized to these error patterns by reviewing the targeted categories, identifying them in sample student essays, and looking for these errors in peer editing exercises (Fig. 7.10; see also Ferris, 2002b, pp. 85–91). Such activities can also "lead students away from the frustrating and often counterproductive notion that they can or should attempt to correct every single error in a given essay draft" (Ferris, 1995c, p. 19).

Exercise: Identifying Error Patterns

Directions. *Read through a sample student essay and highlight every verb or verb phrase. Examine each one carefully to see if there are any errors in verb tense or form. If you find any errors, see if you can suggest a correction. Then, using a different color highlighter, highlight all of the nouns and noun phrases. Check each one to see if it needs a plural or possessive ending, has an incorrect ending, or has an ending that is unnecessary. For any errors you find, suggest a correction. Be prepared to discuss with your classmates and teacher what errors you found, why you think they are wrong, and why you corrected them in the way that you did.*

Note: This exercise is adapted from Ferris, 2002b, p. 89.

FIG. 7.10. Exercise for identifying error patterns.

ERROR LOG

Essay Draft	Verb Errors	Noun Ending Errors	Article Errors	Word Choice Errors	Sentence Structure Errors	Other Errors
1A						
1B						
1C						
2A						
2B						
2C						
3A						
3B						
3C						
4A						
4B						
4C						

Source: Ferris, 2003b, Fig. 7.9, p. 156.

FIG. 7.11. Sample error log.

Phase 3: Students Finding and Correcting Their Own Errors. After students have been made aware of their unique weaknesses in editing through teacher and peer feedback and have practiced identifying error patterns on model student essays and peers' drafts, they should be instructed to locate and correct errors in their own essay drafts. In addition, throughout the semester, the students can keep a log of error frequencies in the different categories to observe their improvement and build their confidence as editors (see Fig. 7.11 and Ferris, 2002b, pp. 91–93 for examples and further discussion). Several researchers have reported that students who consistently maintained error logs made significant progress in reducing their frequency of targeted errors over time (Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000; Lalande, 1982; Roberts, 1999). As the semester progresses and students accumulate more and more editing practice, the amount of editing feedback provided by the teacher should gradually decrease, with the editing task turned over first to peer editors and then to the writers themselves.

Many instructors find it extremely helpful to conduct "error conferences" with their students or to encourage students to meet with a tutor for such conferences (Fig. 7.12). Error conferences can occur during at least two distinct stages of the writing process. First, the teacher can walk with the student through an unmarked

Preliminary (Unmarked) Drafts

1. Ask the student to read the paper aloud while you follow along on a separate copy. Instruct the student to stop and verbalize comments about any errors or corrections she or he notices. Note the errors caught by the student and suggested corrections on your copy of the paper.
2. Then go through the paper again, this time reading it aloud yourself. For any remaining errors not caught by the student during step 1, stop and ask an indirect question ("What about this?" or simply repeat the erroneou s form or phrase). See if the student can suggest a correction for errors you call to his or her attention. Take notes on your copy using a different color of ink.
3. Show the student your paper, marked with two pen colors—one representing errors she or he found and attempted to correct independently, the other representing errors you pointed out. Discuss your findings, pointing out (a) what the student did well in terms of finding and correcting errors, and (b) problematic error types that you notice (either frequent or types resistant to self-editing). Ask the student to take notes on his or her paper, including correct forms that you provide for him or her.
4. Keep your copy of the paper on file for future reference about the student's progress, and for identifying topics for class minilessons.

Marked Drafts

1. Read and provide indirect feedback (error location only) on the student's essay draft. Then ask the student, in class, to attempt corrections for all errors that you marked. Ask the student to number each marked error consecutively and complete an error analysis chart (see following example). Ask the student to produce a revised essay draft (including both corrections and responses to feedback on other issues) before your error conference.

Error Type	*Total Number of Errors*
Verb tense/form	
Noun endings	
Determiners	
Word choice/word form	
Sentence structure: Missing or unnecessary words, word order	
Sentence structure: Fragments, run-ons, or comma Splices	
Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization	
Other_____	

Source: Ferris, 2003b, Appendix 7A, p. 161.

2. Use the marked essay draft, the chart, and the new revision as data sources for your conference. First, walk through the in-class corrections made by the student, discussing (a) whether the student categorized the errors correctly on the chart, and (b) whether the corrections suggested by the student are accurate. Next, compare that draft with the subsequent out-of-class revision. Note where the student did or did not make edits from the previous draft and discuss why (lack of understanding, carelessness, larger text revision, and so on) Take notes on your discussion. Ask the student to summarize what she or he has learned about his or her patterns of error, points of confusion, and editing and revision strategies.
3. Take copies of all the student drafts and attach the notes from your conference. Keep them on file for future reference and lesson planning.

FIG. 7.12. Suggested procedures for error conferences.

student draft, asking the student to read it aloud and noting what structural errors the student can notice by doing so. The teacher can call to the student's attention any errors missed through indirect questioning ("What about this one?") to determine whether the student can recognize the problem when pointed out and suggest a solution.

At a later stage, the teacher and student can look together at a preliminary draft with teacher (or peer or self) error feedback marked, plus the student's edited text. The student should go point-by-point through the marked and edited texts, explaining how and why specific corrections were made (or not made). Similar to miscue analyses in assessing reading comprehension, error conferences can be extremely informative for the teacher, helping him or her to understand students' points of confusion both with error feedback they have received and with the grammatical patterns themselves. Such knowledge can help teachers to refine their own feedback practices and to design minilessons based on firsthand awareness of what students already know or do not know. For students, such focused, contextualized attention to formal errors can be invaluable, especially if they articulate what they think the "rule" is and what their source of knowledge about the language forms might be ("It just doesn't sound right" vs. "I learned it in a grammar class in high school"). Error conferences can also be used for peer editing sessions, allowing students to pool their collective knowledge and intuitions about the language, but with the caveat that the information they share as learners may sometimes be incomplete or even erroneous.

CONCLUSION: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

We have covered three major themes in this chapter under the rubric of helping to promote accuracy in student writing: expert error feedback, grammar instruction, and strategy training. Nonetheless, L2 writing teachers must balance a range of priorities in designing a literacy course that features written production (see chapter 3). Dealing with student errors is only one of these priorities and arguably not even the most important. How, then, do we integrate the "treatment of error" into a comprehensive plan for a particular course? Whereas the specific answer to this question will vary according to the length and

nature of a course, we offer the following summary suggestions for tying error treatment processes into an overall course plan:

1. *Begin each writing course with a diagnostic needs analysis.* This exercise could include student background questionnaires (see Figs. 3.1 and 3.2 for samples), a specific grammar knowledge pretest, and a diagnostic error analysis based on student-produced texts.
2. *As part of teaching students about writing processes, discuss the importance of editing and introduce self-editing strategies.* In our own ESL literacy courses, we tend to move systematically and recursively through the stages of drafting, revision, and editing with each new writing assignment, for example, by teaching idea-generation strategies before first-draft production, revision strategies after the completion of a draft, working with editing strategies after at least one revision, and so on.
3. *Give students individual feedback on essay drafts at various stages of the process.* As discussed earlier in this chapter, this strategy does not necessarily mean marking errors on every single assignment that students produce. It does mean that students should receive feedback regularly from the teacher as well as through peer-editing workshops. (See also chapter 6 for more discussion of peer response.)
4. *Give students time in class to self-edit marked drafts and to chart their errors.* It is tempting simply to return papers to students at the end of class and let them revise and edit on their own time. However, allowing students 10 to 20 minutes in class to review teacher corrections, ask questions of the teacher and peers, and self-correct on the spot can be a very productive use of class time, catching students at a "teachable moment" and allowing them to obtain clarification about problems.
5. *Design and deliver a series of minilessons on grammar and error strategies.* Minilessons should come directly from the initial needs analysis. Teachers may wish to deliver minilessons once a week, every other week, or every time an essay draft is submitted or returned.
6. *Intentionally move students toward autonomy throughout the writing course.* This goal is accomplished by

systematically reducing the amount of error feedback given by the teacher, providing structured in-class and out-of-class opportunities for peer- and self-editing, and requiring students to analyze, chart, and reflect on their progress.

SUMMARY

Over the past two decades, ESL writing instruction has swung from one extreme (attempting to eradicate every single student error) to another (primary attention given to writers' ideas and individual writing processes, with linguistic concerns basically left to "take care of themselves") to a middle ground (combining the best of process-oriented approaches with increased but selective attention to linguistic accuracy). Teachers and students of ESL writing as well as faculty in the disciplines generally agree on the importance of accuracy in student writing and of teaching students to become self-sufficient as editors. As the English-language proficiency of learners' increases, more and more responsibility for editing their own writing can and should be turned over to them. Techniques such as guided writing exercises, identification of error patterns, text analysis, and grammar minilessons can be used to build students' editing skills as they become more proficient in terms of their linguistic and literacy skills. The goal of such a discovery approach should not be perfect written products, but rather ESL writers who gradually reduce the frequency of error in their written production and become increasingly autonomous as editors. It is also extremely important that teachers take students' mother tongue knowledge, L2 skills, and academic backgrounds (especially prior English language instruction) into account in planning instruction, selecting materials, and providing feedback.

REFLECTION AND REVIEW

1. Summarize the arguments in favor of providing feedback only on ideas and organization on preliminary drafts of student papers. What are the arguments in favor of also

providing grammar feedback on early drafts? Which set of arguments do you find more persuasive and why?

2. This chapter maintains that neither teachers nor students should attempt to correct all the errors in a given piece of writing. What are some arguments against this position?
3. To what extent can or should student preferences affect teachers' decisions regarding error correction and explicit grammar instruction? What are the benefits and drawbacks of varying feedback strategies to accommodate individual students' preferences and perceived needs?
4. After arguing that there is no theoretical justification for error correction in L2 writing and that the practical problems with doing so are virtually insurmountable, Truscott (1996) asserted that error correction is worse than useless. He maintained that it is actually harmful because it consumes so much teacher and student energy and attention, taking time away from activities that could promote genuine learning. Imagine that you are a writing teacher who agrees with Truscott's arguments and have therefore decided not to correct students' written errors any longer. You need to write a memo to your supervisor explaining your new position. What would you say? What counterarguments might your supervisor offer in response?
5. The discussion of Truscott's (1996) arguments against error correction in this chapter raises a broader issue: If research evidence contradicts common sense or intuitions, on which should a teacher rely? What if the research evidence is scarce, conflicting, or incomplete (as for many issues in L2 teaching)? While we are waiting for researchers to come up with conclusive answers (if such answers are, indeed, forthcoming), what should teachers do in the meantime?
6. This chapter holds that under certain conditions, supplemental grammar instruction may be necessary and helpful for L2 writing students. What are the potential pitfalls and practical constraints entailed in pursuing this advice, and what should ESL literacy educators do to address or mitigate these problems?
7. Peer feedback and self-evaluation are mentioned at various points in this chapter as mechanisms for helping students improve the accuracy of their written texts and for developing self-editing strategies. Does the idea of learners providing feedback to themselves and others on their errors set off any alarm bells for you? If so, what are they, and

what might you do either to "disconnect the alarm" or to "lower the volume" (i.e., counterarguments or mitigating strategies)?

Application Activity 7.1: Analyzing a Research Review

Directions. Truscott (1996) and Ferris (2003b, Ch. 3) both reviewed numerous studies of L2 error correction. Obtain and carefully read the listed studies and then answer the questions that follow.

Studies: Cohen & Robbins (1976), Fathman & Whalley (1990), Kepner (1991), Lalande (1982), Robb, Ross, & Shortreed (1986), Semke (1984).

Note: Bibliographic information for all the preceding studies is provided in the References section of this volume.

1. For each study, note the following research elements carefully:
   a. How many participants were involved?
   b. In what pedagogical context were the data collected?
   c. What was the duration of the data collection?
   d. If the design was experimental, was a control group used?
   e. What methods were used to collect and analyze data?
2. Now compare your notes on each study. Do you think this body of research is consistent in either research design or body of findings? To what extent can the findings from any one of these studies be generalized to all L2 writers? Are all the studies, taken as a group, generalizable? Why or why not?
3. For each study, note the findings reported and the conclusions drawn by the authors. Compare these conclusions with the summaries of that particular study in the two reviews. In your opinion, are the reviewers' presentations fair and accurate? Was there any other way to interpret the authors' data?
4. Now that you have read both reviews and examined the primary sources carefully, you probably have noticed that

the two reviewers (Truscott and Ferris) arrive at dramatically different conclusions. Considering your own analysis, which reviewer's presentation do you find more convincing, and why?

Application Activity 7.2: Analyzing Errors in a Student Text

Directions. Appendix 7 contains a student paper written for an advanced university ESL course. Perform the following steps to complete an error analysis for this writing sample.

1. Make an extra copy of this paper before marking it in any way. Go through the paper carefully, highlighting all the instances of errors you find for each of the categories in the chart below.

	Error Catagories
Verb errors	All errors in verb tense or form, including relevant subject–verb agreement errors.
Noun-ending errors	Plural or possessive ending incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary; includes relevant subject–verb agreement errors.
Article errors	Article or other determiner incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary.
Wrong word	All specific lexical errors in word choice or word form, including preposition and pronoun errors. Spelling errors included only if the (apparent) misspelling resulted in an actual English word.
Sentence structure	Errors in sentence/clause boundaries (run-ons, fragments, comma splices), word order, omitted words or phrases, unnecessary words or phrases, other unidiomatic sentence construction.
Spelling	Errors in spelling (other than those already classified as word choice)
Other	Errors that do not fit into previous categories (may include capitalization, punctuation not already included in the aforementioned types, and so on)

2. Now number each error you highlighted consecutively and complete the following error chart.

Error Number	*Noun Ending*	*Verb*	*Article*	*Word Choice*	*Sentence Structure*	*Spelling*	*Other*
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11							
12							
13							
14							
15							
16							
17							
18							
19							
20							
21							
22							
23							
24							
25							
26							
27							
28							
29							
30							
Totals							

3. Compare your findings with those of your classmates and instructor. What problems did you encounter, and with what did you struggle as you completed this exercise? What has it taught you about the processes involved in responding to student errors?

Application Activity 7.3: Responding to a Student's Language Errors

Directions. Use the results of the error analysis completed for Application Activity 7.2 to complete this exercise.

1. Choose an error feedback method (or combination of methods) discussed in this chapter—providing direct correction, highlighting or underlining errors, marking errors with codes or verbal rule reminders, making check marks in the margins, providing verbal end comment—and provide feedback as if you were going to return it to the student writer for further editing.
2. Reflect on and discuss the following questions:
   a. What did you see as the student's chief problems or needs, and why?
   b. Did you opt for comprehensive or selective error correction, and why?
   c. Why did you select the feedback method(s) that you did (consider both student needs as identified by your error analysis, error type, and arguments about effective feedback types)?
   d. Now that you have analyzed and responded to a student's language errors, what do you think you still need to learn or practice to provide error feedback successfully on your own students' written assignments?

Application Activity 7.4: Comparing Reference Sources on a Particular Grammar Point

Directions. Imagine you are teaching an ESL writing course and have selected a particular grammar point on which to present a 20- to 30-minute minilesson to the class. Consult several sources for information on this grammar point (e.g., a reference grammar book for teachers, an ESL grammar book, or an editing

handbook). After you have examined the sources, decide how you will address the following questions:

1. Is one source clearer or more appropriate for this point and group of students than the others? Why?
2. What basic information (terms, definitions, examples) will you need to present? Which sources were the most helpful in providing these?
3. What rules and strategies for avoiding errors might you include? Which sources were the most helpful in identifying these?
4. Did you find any discovery activities or editing exercises that might be helpful for your lesson? How might you need to adapt these to accommodate your own students' needs?

Application Activity 7.5: Developing Grammar/Editing Lessons

Directions. Examine the two student papers in Appendix 7. Imagine that you are teaching a writing course and that these papers are representative of your students' abilities and grammatical skills. Following the principles discussed in this chapter and the examples shown in Figs. 7.4–7.6, design a 20- to 30-minute minilesson on a specific grammar point that might address these students' needs. This minilesson must include the following components: (a) discovery (text analysis) activity, (b) deductive explanation of important terms and rules, (c) practice and application activities (some can be assigned as homework so that you can meet time constraints). Begin your lesson with a brief overview of the procedures you would use to teach this lesson. This overview should include any prior knowledge or previous instruction assumed as background for the lesson.

NOTES

[1]Truscott (1999) insisted on making a distinction between the terms "error correction" and "grammar correction." However, we use the terms interchangeably in this chapter.

[2]A study by Polio, Fleck, and Leder (1998) provided counterevidence to these studies. Their article was, of course, published after Truscott's (1996) review

essay. Another study cited by Truscott and others as negative evidence on error correction is that of Semke (1984), but the study's lack of methodologic clarity makes her results hard to interpret (see Ferris, 2003b; 2004 for discussion).

[3]Critics of error correction research have dismissed the first line of (quasi-experimental) research because it is not longitudinal, asserting that the fact that students could successfully edit their texts in the short term does not demonstrate that any such progress would stand up over time. However, we counterargue that improved products are a legitimate end in themselves, and that the cognitive investment of editing one's text after receiving error feedback is likely a necessary step on the road to long-term improvement in accuracy. The same critics similarly dismiss the second line of (longitudinal) research because, typically, no control group (i.e., a no-error-correction cohort) is included. These critics claim that measured improvements in accuracy over time could result from factors other than error correction. Although we grant this point, we observe that if error correction were truly useless or even harmful, we would see no progress and perhaps even regression in the texts of students receiving it. The research base on this issue is remarkably consistent in finding measurable, often statistically significant, improvement. See Ferris (2004) for further discussion.

[4]We do not address here the distinction made in the literature between "errors" (reflecting a gap in the learner's competence) and "mistakes" (reflecting a temporary lapse in the learner's performance).

[5]It is only fair to ESL writers to point out that some of these distinctions can seem arbitrary and idiosyncratic (Why can we say "I bought several chairs," but not "*several furnitures"?), and that even NSs do not use them systematically: We do not say "*I drank three *coffees*," but a restaurant server, taking orders, might say, "OK, that's three coffees."

[6]As an example, many ESL writing and grammar textbooks focus on helping students master the English determiner system or on understanding sentence boundaries (i.e., how to avoid run-ons, fragments, and comma splices). Yet in a recent study of nearly 100 university ESL writers in which more than 5,700 errors were classified, it was found that article errors and clause boundary errors comprised a relatively small percentage of the total: articles (6.6%), run-ons (2.9%), and fragments (1.8%). (Chaney, 1999; Ferris et al., 2000)

[7]Ferris (2002b, pp. 99–100) provided guidelines for the selection and adaptation of student text models for minilessons. These include considerations of whether to use papers written by students currently in the class, whether to correct errors, and whether the use of "good" or "bad" student models is more effective.

[8]Even Truscott (1999), the most outspoken opponent of grammar correction, acknowledges that teaching students self-editing strategies may have value.

APPENDIX 7: SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAYS

Note: These essay samples accompany Application Activities 7.2, 7.3, and 7.5. They were written by college seniors during the first week of a course entitled "Writing for Proficiency" (Ferris, 2001b). Students had 50 minutes to write in class on the topic, "Are lies always harmful or are they sometimes helpful?"

Sample Essay A

Today, in people's daily life, they often lie to protect themselves, to fit into a specific group, to make others feel better, or to help others in a different way. Yet, no matter what reason that cause people tell untruthful information, their purpose id to more on their living. However, no all lies are harmful. They can be helpful in some appropriate situations. It all depends how people view them.

It is true that sometimes lies are harmful. They can cause broken relationships, such as friendship, husband and wife, or parents and children. According to Goodrich, "if one promise to do lunch when this person knew that they will never get together." If later on the other person discovered the teller's purpose, their relationship would not go along well. Also, Goodrich states that many parents tell their children that Santa Claus will come on Christmas Eve. In this situation, although parents say that is to make the Christmas more enjoyable and make their children happier, as the children grow up and find out the true on their own, they may not very happy their parents' attitude. Although the result may not terrible till broken their parents and children relationship it may bring some negative parent's value in children's mind. In this situation, lying is harmful to both parents and children.

However, sometimes, tell a lie can be helpful if people deal with it appropriate. I remember two friends of mine Jack and John were best friends. They grew up together and went to school together. Yet, during their college year, Jack was Major in accounting because he like business very much. On the other hand, John was not interested in business much. He was having difficult time to chose his major. At the same time, he still wants to be with Jack all of the time. Once, when Jack asked John to

major in business so they can still go to classes together, John responded by saying "OK", even though he did not like business classes, John found out he enjoy being manager after his college. John's lie did not hurt him and Jack. In fact, it helps him to choose his major while he did not know what to do. On the other hand, Jack also got some help from John while their studying. Therefore lies can be beneficial sometimes.

As a result, not all lies are wrong. Some are harmful while others are helpful.

Sample Essay B

I believe sometimes lies can be harmful or not appropriate. We have to lie because we do not want to hurt anybody's feelings. We lie, because we want to look good in front of some people. We lie because sometimes we want to get away from something. Sometimes we lie because we want to get caught. It's all dependent on the situation or how bad the circumstances will get if we lie.

I think the definition of "a lie" is being dishonest to others. When people lie to each other they are not true to themselves. They are simply playing with other people. Some people lie because sometimes truth can hurt someone.

"Lying is also exciting" (Margaret Summy) I believe in her statement. When people lie about stories or make up stories, they may be want to make them more interesting. For example, if a man tries to impress a woman by telling her lies, by all means do it. But the the end the result is she's going to find out sooner or later. It goes back and forth with men and women.

Some people lies to save their relationships. I believe in order to keep my family together if I have to lie I would not hesitate. I think relationships are far more important than a little or big lies. Sometimes people lie for good reasons, lying can be harmful if we act on a untrue information, we can be hurt physically or emotionally it can put a friction between a one strong relationship. Lying is bad for our body too. One lies leads to another which means we always have to keep our false story in our brain.

"Lying is hard on us physically. We breathe faster, our hearts beat harder, and our blood pressure goes up." (Terry Lee Goodrich) In our armies, we trained our soldiers to be good liars if they get caught, with a good lie they can save their lives. An expert can always pinpoint a liar. Most of us are not very good liars.

We can get caught very easily. We need to work on our breathing and heart beat in order to be a good liar.

People says everyone lies, does not matter if it is a little lie or big lie. I believe in and think this statement is true. Most of the time, when people lie they do not want to hurt no one. We lie because it's part of our lives.

Source. Ferris, Kennedy, and Senna, Spring, 2003 research corpus (Texts 18 and 19). Used with student permission.