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Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing

Dana Ferris

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.

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Perhaps the most perplexing and daunting question for second language (L2) writing teachers is what kind of feedback to give students on their written work. Theories, empirical studies, debate, and opinion abound in regards to how to tailor feedback to improve L2 student writing. Before 1970, feedback consisted mainly of grammatical corrections, but since that time the prevailing wisdom (influenced by process writing) has been that grammatical feedback is ineffective in improving grammatical accuracy. While many writing instructors have embraced this notion through the years and focused less on grammar and more on the content and development of ideas in student writing, the treatment of error has remained a central concern to both L2 teachers and L2 writers. Renewed interest in the debate was sparked by Truscott's 1996 article in which he claims all grammatical correction to be ineffective and even detrimental.

Dana Ferris's *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing* attempts to answer Truscott's objections and provide preservice and in-service ESL writing teachers with suggestions for responding to errors. As the title indicates, Ferris's thesis is that many L2 writing errors are in fact treatable and should be addressed by writing teachers. She begins her book by briefly outlining the history of error treatment. In the opening chapter she notes that while debate may continue about the best method, it is clear that grammatical intervention is needed for and expected by L2 students. Chapter 2 reviews relevant studies concerning feedback and concludes that treatment of error, if done well, results in improved grammatical accuracy. Chapter 3 describes the knowledge and skills that L2 writing teachers should have to treat error in student writing. Chapter 4 describes practical ways in which writing instructors can respond to errors, including a lengthy discussion on the merits of direct versus indirect feedback. Chapter 5 discusses issues related to error such as helping students develop self-editing skills, teaching grammar, and peer editing. An appendix offers several forms helpful for teachers as they refine and reevaluate their treatment

of error in L2 writing.

The merits of *Treatment of Error* include its rich review of the literature, which is presented in a cogent manner. Ferris is honest about the lack of empirical evidence for some of her assertions, but as she claims, many of them have an intuitive appeal to ESL writing teachers. Issues to consider when treating error are clearly laid out and explained in sufficient detail.

Ferris leaves herself open to criticism for overemphasizing the need for correction. Obviously the volume deals with the treatment of error, but novice teachers should take care not to forget that other types of feedback improve papers as well. Perhaps the biggest drawback is the lack of empirical evidence for the volume's main argument. Ferris acknowledges that it is difficult to say for certain if student improvement results from direct intervention or if it results from more writing practice and exposure to English, yet she fervently maintains the efficacy of error treatment. There is nothing particularly revelatory in the strategies that she lays out in chapter 4. Many good writing instructors surely teach the strategies mentioned, but they do bear repeating for less experienced teachers.

Overall, the book is a solid treatment of a difficult issue and provides practical suggestions for practitioners. Ferris claims that the volume is not a how-to book, but rather an "integrated way that assumes that such treatment involves not only teacher feedback and grammar instruction but also consciousness raising, strategy training and student accountability" (p. 1).

Reference

Truscott, J. (1996). The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes. *Language Learning*, 46, 327-369.

Text and Thought: An Integrated Approach to College Reading and Writing (2nd ed.)

Lanny Lester and Judith Resnick
New York: Longman, 2003.

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The second edition of Lester and Resnick's *Text and Thought* offers an innovative resource for advanced ESL learners. The organization and supporting articles are well chosen so that students will find the topics challenging yet cognitively rewarding. Using psychologist Abraham Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs as a guide, Lester and Resnick organize the content selections of each chapter based on his pyramid. Maslow believed humans fulfill needs methodically, first seeking physiological comfort before finally

desiring self-actualization. Each chapter follows a definite order: information about English language usage, textbook selections from various sources pertinent to a theme from Maslow's hierarchy, journal space for free writing, and updated electronic sources. Reading and writing exercises on the topics introduced are interspersed throughout each chapter.

Chapter 1 introduces basic strategies for academic reading and writing with a useful focus on individual learning styles. Chapter 2 presents the first theme, "Motivation and Emotion," and provides information on organizing textbook information. Chapter 3 focuses on topics and main ideas with reading selections based on the physiological needs of eating, sleeping, and dreaming. Subsequent chapters devote a large, thorough section to a certain human necessity from Maslow's pyramid, complemented by relevant articles that are sensitively chosen to spark lengthy discussions in class. Authentic excerpts from health and psychology textbooks, political documents such as the Bill of Rights, and *The New York Times* articles are designed to provide a thought-provoking context for developing academic reading and writing skills. One of the major strengths of this text is the sound integration of both academic reading and writing skills in a single volume.

Language lessons progress logically from topic sentences and main ideas, details, inferences, organization of essays, and summaries. Although its placement at the conclusion of the text initially seems odd, summary is tackled last because students are expected to use all the skills learned in chapters 1 through 6 to produce quality summaries. The only topic that is not in its logical place is "Avoiding Plagiarism" (chapter 7). Ideally, it should be placed at the beginning to emphasize its importance.

Sections both teachers and students will find helpful are the "Correct English Handbook," providing concise grammar explanations and exercises, and the "Additional Readings" at the end of the text. These include selections from influential American writers such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Sandra Cisneros, which allow students to read personal essays related to Maslow's pyramid.

The textbook's thorough coverage of both the academic language skills and topic content, however, could potentially frustrate some students, since chapters are necessarily lengthy. More superficially, pages are perforated, which, though convenient for teachers, may annoy students when they begin to fall out.

But the shortcomings do not detract from the overall value of the textbook. Perhaps its greatest strength is that it does not condescend. Lester and Resnick assume that students are intelligent and curious, choosing content and tailoring exercises accordingly. Provocative topics in this text provide content-based, communicative classrooms not only the necessary material to foster fluency in reading and writing, but also to impart relevant academic and cultural knowledge. For this reason, *Text and Thought* is an ideal college-level text for advanced second-language students.

Reference

Maslow, A. (1970). *Motivation and Personality* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Vocabulary in Language Teaching

Norbert Schmitt

Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

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Vocabulary in Language Teaching by Norbert Schmitt provides readers with the fundamental concepts of the nature and function of vocabulary and suggests how teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) can use this knowledge in the classroom. The author pays special attention to the role of vocabulary learning in language acquisition and focuses on how vocabulary can be taught in ESL courses.

The text's biggest strength is its reader-friendly organization. The format and layout of the volume are clear, and the aim of each chapter is clearly outlined. The text consists of nine chapters, in addition to assorted appendixes, references, and an index. Each chapter contains a short summary of its main points and suggestions for further reading. Each chapter is followed by "Application to Teaching," in which Schmitt offers teachers tips and suggestions for how to effectively apply the concepts from the previous chapters in an actual classroom setting. Chapters also include "Exercises for Teaching," a section that helps readers analyze, evaluate, and apply the information they have read.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, which contains chapters 1 and 2, deals with historic aspects of vocabulary learning and teaching, providing basic information about vocabulary, such as "what is a word?" and "what methodologies have been used?" ESL teachers might also find the segments covering language-teaching methodologies and linguistic analysis of vocabulary interesting because they can use this information in classroom settings.

The second section consists of chapters 3 to 7, which focus on meaning, form, usage, patterns, and acquisition. In these chapters Schmitt describes what constitutes the meaning of a word and what makes a word grammatical and meaningful with the help of linguistic terms. Most of the linguistic terminology is italicized with brief definitions and explanations in the appendix. Some diagrams are also used to illustrate his points.

The third section covers methodologies of teaching and testing vocabulary. Schmitt discusses how to incorporate vocabulary teaching into writing,

listening, and speaking activities. He argues that vocabulary research has tended to focus on the role of vocabulary in reading, but in reality, all four language skills require vocabulary. In particular, he notes how this approach affects vocabulary test-taking, which is discussed in chapter 9.

Schmitt's presentation in this book is not based merely on research, but also on his own teaching experiences. Schmitt does not speak of the right way or best way to teach vocabulary, but as he comments in the preface, the purpose of this volume is to introduce a number of pedagogical approaches that can help teachers decide what techniques are most useful for their students.

Some readers may be overwhelmed by the amount of text since this volume lacks color illustrations and visual content. Moreover, it contains linguistic concepts and terminology, such as *grapheme* (smallest unit in a writing system) and *prosody* (rhythm, flow, and stress of a language), so some readers or teachers who do not have this linguistic knowledge might find the book less accessible. Therefore, it might be best suited for those teachers, learners, and others who have a basic knowledge in linguistics.

Despite those shortcomings, this text is definitely an effective teacher-education text. All chapters provide teachers with opportunities to expand their knowledge and techniques of how to teach vocabulary. This text is also useful for students who would like to enlarge both their vocabularies and their repertoire of learning strategies. *Vocabulary in Language Teaching* is not a manual filled with esoteric theories or concepts but instead encourages teachers to be creative. Readers of this book will find it a valuable resource that can be adapted to various ESL settings.

Reviewing Basic Grammar: A Guide to Writing Sentences and Paragraphs (5th ed.)

Mary Laine Yarber and Robert E. Yarber
New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001.

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Writing and grammar skills are a must for academic success. English teachers the world over have attempted to ingrain this message into their students' heads, yet many incoming college students still find writing to be their greatest challenge. It is for precisely this reason that the team of Mary Laine Yarber and Robert E. Yarber set out to create *Reviewing Basic Grammar: A Guide to Writing Sentences and Paragraphs*.

This book effectively addresses the structural writing needs of both students for whom English is a second language as well as native speakers preparing to take introductory English writing courses. The content progresses from exercises that review basic parts of speech to editing techniques for

correcting errors commonly made in writing complex sentences. Punctuation and spelling tips are provided in the final chapters. In addition, the appendix includes a special “Checklist for the ESL Writer” that addresses grammar problems specific to ESL learners.

Reviewing Basic Grammar contains several outstanding features that merit its recommendation. As a grammar book, it can be used as either the main text in a developmental writing course or as a supplement to a general English class. Grammar exercises are sequenced in order of difficulty, consisting of sentences that form meaningful paragraphs. This allows students to grasp the progression of elements within a well-written paragraph.

To further aid students in the writing process, the authors also recommend using the entire *Reviewing Basic Grammar* “Learning Package,” which consists of an instructor’s manual/test bank and a text-specific Web site. The preface also includes a list of other recommended supplemental materials, including electronic tutorials and writing-focused Web sites for both teachers and students. Another aspect of this book that deserves mention is the authors’ inclusion of a section on “Avoiding Sexism in Pronoun Usage,” which helps students develop a sensibility to unbiased language.

Strong points aside, *Reviewing Basic Grammar* might benefit from a few suggestions. In chapter 1, the authors mention the importance of “standard written English” in international communication and for written reports and proposals at the workplace, yet nowhere in the book are there exercises for these specific genres. Also, *Reviewing Basic Grammar* would benefit from more colorful formatting, which would make the text more attractive to students and lessen eye fatigue due to waiting until midnight to complete homework assignments.

The CBET Handbook for the Oxford Picture Dictionaries

James Adelson-Goldstein and Norma Shapiro
New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

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With the passing of California Proposition 227, a state-funded program was developed for parents of English language learners. The purpose of the Community Based English Tutoring (CBET) Program is for local education agencies (LEAs) to provide free or subsidized programs of adult English language instruction to parents or other members of the community who pledge to provide personal English language tutoring to English learners (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/cilbranch/cbet>). Unfortunately, publishers have not focused on Community Based English Tutoring and as a result, CBET resources for teachers have been scarce.

However, Oxford University Press has taken an interest in CBET by publishing *The CBET Handbook for the Oxford Picture Dictionaries*. This *Handbook* is part of Oxford's English Language Development program, which includes workbooks, picture dictionaries, a teacher's resource book, and classroom activities book.

One of the best attributes of the *Handbook* is its simple organization, which makes the book manageable even for the novice teacher. The book is divided into three major sections: strategies for teaching with the Oxford Picture Dictionary Programs, lessons on tutoring skills with reproducible readings and worksheets, and lessons on organizing and planning skills. The target audience is ESL/CBET instructors; however, the content may be helpful to adults who have children, adults who would like to tutor, or adults who lack reading strategies and organizational skills.

The first section of the book will be useful to teachers who have access to Oxford's other materials, such as *The Oxford Picture Dictionary* or *Classic Classroom Activities*. This section includes procedures on introducing a new topic and presenting new language along with activities. A few of the activities involve using picture cards, which are not included in this handbook. However, teachers can either make their own picture cards or use reproducible picture cards from another source. Students seem to enjoy the activities in this first section, because they provide them the opportunity to become actively engaged with the material and with each other. They may also become familiar with the new vocabulary in a short time using these activities. The students, in turn, could teach these "games" to other students, making learning more meaningful.

While the first section contains some enjoyable activities, the second section is likely to be the most useful for the teacher. In this section, all the lessons have one goal: to teach adults *how* to tutor reading. Nevertheless, these lessons are also useful to students in the early stages of literacy as they teach strategies and activities for independent reading. This section may be indispensable for new ESL instructors who need to become familiar with the strategies of beginning readers.

The lessons in the second section are presented in order, from the first lesson on how to start a conversation with a student to the last lesson on how to give praise and correct errors. Each lesson is divided into three parts: the first part begins with "Teacher's Notes" (the objective, background information for the teacher and the background knowledge required of the student). The second part is a reading for the student, and the last part is a worksheet to practice the new skill.

The third section, "Teaching Organizing and Planning Skills to Your Adult Students," serves as an extension to section 2 and is self-explanatory. It is organized in the same manner as the previous section with the teacher's notes, student reading, and practice worksheet. These lessons focus on teaching students how to be independent learners and tutors. Students learn to use and create a monthly calendar, create a place to study, plan a tutoring session, and record tutoring goals and activities.

Although the final section of the *Handbook* plays a valuable role in student success, it requires a high level of English proficiency. For example, one lesson's objective is "to help tutors prepare for, plan, reflect on, and chart their tutorial sessions," which requires students to fill out four different forms in one lesson, whereas in section 2, there was only one practice sheet per lesson. Thus the final unit may not be suitable for a beginning-level class.

Overall, the *Handbook* serves as a nice start in teaching tutoring, reading, planning, and organizing skills to adult students. It is advisable to present the lessons sequentially since they tend to build on each other. The most beneficial part of the *Handbook* is section 2, which can be used alone as long as the teacher makes or has access to picture cards. The lesson plans are easy to follow and concise as they allow students to practice skills and strategies before entering the classroom, making the transition from student to tutor much smoother. Students also build planning and organizing skills that help them achieve success.