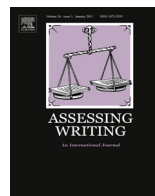




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## Assessing Writing



# How much feedback is enough?: Instructor practices and student attitudes toward error treatment in second language writing



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### ABSTRACT

Among second language writing scholars who believe that error treatment is an effective means of improving accuracy in second language writing, most advocate that instructors take a selective approach to marking errors. However, to what extent do instructors of second language writing implement this “best practice”? What are student perceptions of their instructors’ approaches? The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate (1) what percentage of errors instructors of second language writing marked in student work and why and (2) student attitudes toward selective versus comprehensive error treatment. The participants included three instructors and 19 students of a first-year composition course for international students at a large U.S. university. Interviews revealed that the three instructor participants each differed in how much feedback they provided but that their approaches were flexible and context-dependent. Reflecting previous studies, the student participants also preferred comprehensive error treatment but reported being satisfied with the approach of an instructor who marked errors selectively. Additional findings show that there were discrepancies in how instructors and students of the same class describe the instructor’s approach to error treatment and that students relied overwhelmingly on instructor feedback when editing. Pedagogical implications are included.

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## 1. Introduction

For scholars of second language writing, how to most effectively respond to student writing remains a matter of great interest. With at least 14 articles and three books on the topic, an overview of second language writing research published in 2011 named feedback as one of the year's most significant trends (Silva, McMartin-Miller, Peláez-Morales, & Lin, 2012).

Among those who believe that error treatment – defined by Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005 as “not only teacher feedback and grammar instruction but also consciousness raising, strategy training, and student accountability” (p.1) – contributes to improved accuracy in student writing, the majority recommends that instructors take a selective approach when marking papers (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Lee, 2011, etc.). In this approach, instructors do not mark every grammatical, vocabulary, or mechanical error that occurs throughout the entirety of a student paper; rather, they identify a limited number of error types and mark only those.

This strategy not only saves time for the instructor but also potentially allows students to recognize patterns of error within their writing, avoid being overwhelmed by teacher feedback, and develop independent editing skills in that they – and not the instructor – are then responsible for locating and addressing errors that are unmarked. As a result, selective error treatment is sometimes said to foster second language acquisition. Writes Ellis et al. (2008), “Learners are more likely to attend to corrections directed at a single (or a limited number of) error type(s) and more likely to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of the error and the correction needed” (p. 356).

Despite its advantages, however, a selective approach to error treatment may be challenging – particularly for novice instructors – in that it can require teachers to make decisions regarding which and how many error types to address based mostly on intuition. In addition, misunderstandings between an instructor and a student may occur when an instructor uses a selective approach, but students believe that errors are being marked comprehensively. In this case, not only do students fail to benefit from the additional editing practice a selective approach affords, but because they are only addressing a portion of the total number of errors as they prepare their final drafts, their grades may suffer, as well.

In order to understand how recommendations from second language writing research and literature are put into practice, the first purpose of the current study is to describe the extent to which graduate instructors of second language writing respond to errors in student work. More specifically, this research is intended to determine under what circumstances these instructors employ comprehensive versus selective treatment of error and how they came to develop this approach. The second purpose of the study is to examine student attitudes toward error treatment, including whether they prefer selective or comprehensive error treatment.

## 2. The nebulous nature of a selective error treatment

The range of interpretations of a selective approach to error treatment is evident in two widely used teacher guidebooks.

In 1993s *Writing Clearly: Responding to ESL Compositions*, Bates et al., 1993 advise instructors to mark only “global” errors in student writing. Adopting the work of Burt and Kiparsky (1972), Bates et al. (1993) define global errors as those that impede understanding of a text. This category includes: incorrect verb tense; verb incorrectly formed; incorrect use or formation of a modal; incorrect use or formation of a conditional sentence; incorrect sentence structure; incorrect or awkward word order; incorrect or missing connector; incorrect formation or use of passive voice; and unclear message. Bates et al. (1993) divide remaining error types into two groups, “local” and “other.” Local errors are less serious than global errors in that, though distracting, they do not usually impede understanding. This group includes: incorrect subject-verb agreement; incorrect or missing article; problems with the singular or plural of a noun; wrong word choice; wrong word form; and non-idiomatic expressions. The errors that Bates et al. (1993) classify as “other” are those they say are typically made by native speakers of English. This group includes: capitalization; coherence; comma

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