Developing an Editing Marking Scheme: An Evolving Process

Art Schneider
Dr. Art Schneider is a member of the English Faculty at Sharjah Colleges, Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE, working in the Health Sciences department. Previously, he taught ESL, research writing for doctoral candidates, and academic writing for undergraduates at the University of Florida, USA. He has a doctorate in Science Education from Columbia University, USA along with graduate degrees in TESOL, Psychology, and Organizational Behavior.
The use of editing schemes has stimulated debate for many years in the field of ESL/EFL. Writing feedback ranges from none to overt direct correction, with the use of editing schemes somewhere in the middle (Lee, 2006). That is, advanced students may require less in the way of feedback, whereas lower level students may simply lack the understanding to benefit from anything other than direct corrections with explanations. Most students are, however, somewhere in the middle and can variously benefit from hints or clues about error correction, and this is the basic idea behind using editing marks. While there is disagreement as to the effectiveness of error correction marks, it is the contention of this paper that such marks are useful both in theory and in practice, but should be looked at as a recursive and evolving process that significantly benefits from instructor and peer feedback, rather than being a static ‘silver bullet’ that helps all students all the time. What’s more, there is evidence that students seem to prefer it as well, and for a number of reasons: students want to participate in their learning of writing and have chances for re-writes (Fregeau, 1999); students find conferencing to be more effective than written comments (Williams, 2003); students like making corrections on their own by using error correction marks (Leki, 1990); and students prefer feedback about their writing to simple direct correction (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). It is because such interactive feedback is thought central to using writing correction symbols that the editing approach used may be designated as EF, or error correction feedback.

In this small study, using qualitative action research methods, three intact classes were provided with EF over an 18 week semester and most students saw discernible improvements in both error recognition and error correction.

**Writing as a Collaboration**

In the most basic sense ESL writing is an attempt to communicate with other humans (Hayes, 1996). It is driven by certain cognitive (Doughty & Long, 2005) and executive skills (Weir & Shaw, 2006) takes place within a specific context, has a particular purpose, and is shaped to fit an intended audience (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997). Academic writing is no exception in sharing these features and they are reflected in the collaborative aspects of EF, with its discussions, feedback, and peer interactions.

Error correction marks, when combined with instructor and peer feedback, fit well within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) framework (Vygotsky, 1978) in that nothing is assumed about how much students will understand about the writing process as time goes by, only that students will continue to indicate where their weaknesses lie as they make errors. The basic assumption is that students will improve with interactive feedback, but will do so at their own rate of development. As the expert in feedback sessions, the instructor takes every opportunity to lead students to greater knowledge through clues. Clues are considered to be a form of scaffolding (Bruner, 1990), during which there is a brief inquiry into student knowledge. EF interactions may also be viewed as building language awareness (Kiely, 2009), from which it may be argued that part of successfully learning another language is the ability to think aloud more clearly, more comfortably, and more recursively about what goes into effective writing. From this perspective it is further argued that students may be seen as teaching themselves as they share and negotiate their understanding of various aspects of language (Fortune, 2005; Coelho, 1996). A phenomenon that many ESL/EFL teachers have had the pleasure of experiencing is witness a student having an epiphany of understanding in the midst of such a meta-language tête-à-tête.

It is also clear from student discussions in ESL classrooms that second language learners’ abilities to use language effectively, both orally and in writing, may be guided by, as Gardner (1999) put it, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic musical, naturalist, interpersonal and/or intrapersonal intelligences. Bruner (1966/2004) spoke of enactive (actions), iconic (pictures), and symbolic (words and numbers) modes of conceptualizing the world.
The error mark correction process includes the enactive mode of writing and correcting, the visual or iconic mode of the marks themselves, and the symbolic mode of words in written and spoken language. The interactive feedback process is an attempt to understand how students think about their writing, which may help inform the instructor as to which channel is best for communication.

**Learner Engagement**

Student knowledge exists in many degrees of incompleteness and that is the best assumption for writing teachers to make. The discovery of real-time knowledge via editing hints becomes the teachable moments (Siegfried, 1992). Krashen's *just difficult enough* (i+1) concept is, therefore, an integral part of the EF advocated approach. However, in addition to unpredictable learning rates, students' writing development is also full of chaos (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) which cannot be controlled per se, but only guided (de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2006). One may look at this confusion as an effort by students to participate. So, instead of trying to battle against this inherent disorganization, it can be argued that the best use of teaching energy is to actually use SLA (second language acquisition) chaos as a heuristic (learning tool) by encouraging student questions and stimulating peer feedback by answering questions with clues and hints, and of course, asking more questions. Compared to unidirectional direct editing feedback, the EF process then requires not only greater instructor vigilance for teachable moments, but also the judgment to know when to leave peer discussions alone. Such work motivates ESL students by creating a more positive affective climate and improving the quality of student interactions/awareness (Long & Porter, 1998). With such variation between students' L2 language skills it may be useful to think of one's learners as slices from a block of Swiss cheese—every slice has holes (i.e., gaps in knowledge and skills), but the holes are in different places.

**Process Versus Product**

Another foundational element of the EF is the emphasis on *process* in the development of writing products. In particular, the more positively affective the learning process is, the more apt students are to retain information (Scovel, 2000), and thus produce a better writing product. EF combines such positive affect with *think-aloud* or metacognitive protocols (Anderson, 2007), and is similar to some basic elements of 'stimulated recall' (Gass & Mackey, 2000). Such interactive metacognition facilitates SLA writing acquisition in at least two ways: students can actively resolve questions and thereby fill in knowledge gaps; and students can be stimulated to be more aware of their own learning (Schmidt, 1990). This helps them to build an increasingly versatile hierarchical foundation of writing concept connections, as in the case of concept mapping (Fosnot, 1996), or knowledge mapping (O'Donnell, Dansereau, & Hall, 2002). This process occurs through the questioning and commenting process, which is bidirectional and increasingly more complex over time, essentially providing students with the opportunity to learn how to learn. The concepts of *noticing, retrieval and generative use* (the whole exceeding the sum of the parts) are very much at play here (Nation, 2001).

Finally, because of the interactive nature of the EF process, there is greater potential for instructors to get energy rather than just giving it. That is, EF takes advantage of the basic psychological principle that conversations can yield psychological energy as well as demand it (Glasser, 1998). Instructors, through conversation, must provide students with ongoing opportunities to be informative about their writing knowledge gaps through various facets of the metacognitive process. Thus, constant EF support via dialogue (Auerbach, 1992; Freire, 1970) in the learning process helps balance out instructor and student participation, therefore encouraging students to become more independent learners. Ultimately, this means that instructors can increasingly work with students and spend less time working for them. Thus, feedback should be proactive at first, but after students are familiar with corrections symbols then there should be more...
emphasis on self-correction, then peer correction, and finally instructor correction, the sum total of which may progressively increase the level of student learning autonomy.

**Motivation**

Perhaps the single largest variable explaining SLA in sufficiently motivated students is psychological comfort (Curran, 1976; Rardin, Tranel, Tirone, & Green, 1988). Students studying virtually anything at any age still rely on what is termed ‘teacher power’ or confidence to feel comfortable in the classroom. This power is motivating to students in two ways: as a constant delineation of behavioral boundaries in the classroom; and as a reflection of societal hierarchies of power (Delpit, 1995). Thus, the EF process is a balance between classroom discipline and welcoming brainstorming with students in the editing process, which requires the confidence to unveil basically unedited thoughts (King & Gilbert, 1994). One very concrete way to encourage students to take charge during the writing correction process is to select some students to act as ‘guest teacher’ for a mini-lesson. This is very empowering to students and highly motivating for them to ‘get it right.’ EF tries to take advantage of the fact that ESL students who ‘try,’ no matter what the output quality, make significantly better progress than those who do not (Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994; Siegfried, 1992).

It must be said that there is a limit to the motivation that EF alone may provide for autonomous learning. Students must have sufficient motivation to participate in their own learning. As a source of extrinsic motivation EF can provide a supportive atmosphere for learning and experimenting. Students must, however, also have intrinsic motivations for successful SLA (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2005; Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000).

**The Study**

**Method**

Three intact classes totalling 40 students were exposed to this editing ‘clue’ scheme over a period of an 18-week semester. A normal part of the students’ writing in English Communications classes is to write four Essay Portfolios (EP) over the course of the semester. In each EP there are two writing tasks. EPs are done for two purposes: as formative practice for academic writing and as practice for what are termed Progress Tests (PT), which are given three times per semester. The writing exam of PTs involves two types of writing tasks, which are practiced for in EPs on alternate occasions (EP1 practices Task 1, EP2 Task 2, and so on). In the Progress Tests, Tasks 1 & 2 are presented together and are to be done in one sitting of 60 minutes total. PT and EP writing tasks are specifically designed to imitate IELTS writing tasks, as much of the point of doing the former is to reach the required level in the latter.

Editing marks for this study were applied to students’ Essay Portfolio writings, which were either of Task 1 or Task 2 type. Editing marks included those indicating missing punctuation/word/article, spelling, singular/plural, unclear meaning, and tense issues (Table 1). Repeated errors were first highlighted with the appropriate editing mark two or three times, and then with a question mark thereafter. The aim of the latter was to get students to see the pattern and make the correction based on critical thinking, or a generalization of their knowledge.

**Results**

Several editing symbols were used the majority of the time, which were repeatedly explained for the students. Table 1 illustrates these symbols (with attempts by students to correct the error) along with their meaning and other useful information.
### Table 1. Major editing marks used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>% Correct Response</th>
<th>Number of Times Used*</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underline w/ ? mark</td>
<td>Unclear meaning</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample" /></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>Good tool to use in feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Tense</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample" /></td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>Clear that a separate mark was needed for s-v agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample" /></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>Many spelling corrections were (strangely) also misspelled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Singular/plural</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample" /></td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>Very successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P with caret</td>
<td>Punctuation Missing</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample" /></td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>Simple but effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V with caret</td>
<td>Verb missing</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample" /></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>More difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R with caret</td>
<td>Article missing</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample" /></td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>Effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Noun’ (sometimes N)</td>
<td>Noun required</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sample" /></td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>difficult</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For all 40 students, on all Essay Portfolios over the study periods

Correct recognition of these editing marks ranged from about 96% (s/p for singular/plural mark) down to about 40% (for unclear meaning), with six of eight marks used enjoying about a 73%
correct detection rate (on average). The use of question marks, instead of editing marks, for repeated errors was successful about 75% of the time (not represented on the table). All three student groups saw consistent improvement in their clue deciphering skills and in their writing. That is, both first and second draft papers saw fewer mistakes in major error categories over the semester period.

Discussion

It is clear from Table 1 that some marks worked better than others, and this may be simply because some errors are more easily self-corrected. On the easy end of the spectrum are the singular-plural marks (SP), where adding an 's' was frequently the answer. On the difficult end are the question marks indicating confusion over meaning. What is not represented on Table 1 is the fact that students became better at correcting the more difficult-to-understand marks as time went by through the use of instructor and peer feedback. Instructor feedback took several forms, including hints, examples, asking the student what she thought, or asking peers what they thought. Virtually all students involved in this study very much liked the interactive nature of such instructor feedback, reacting to the ‘think aloud’ nature almost as if it were a game. Often when giving feedback to one student, others would join in with their proposed answers. The point is that in the process of giving feedback in the editing mark process, it became apparent that generalization had taken place in students’ abilities to intelligently discuss the writing process. Given that there was improvement in the execution of successive Essay Portfolio (EP) products over the course of the semester, a logical question would be: Did students improve their Progress Test (PT) scores as well (after all EP essays are done to practice for PT essays)? Unfortunately, there are inconsistencies between EPs and PTs, in scoring, in the amount of writing required, in the time limits, and in the general nature of the two situations. On the PT there are two writing tasks (Task 1 & 2 as above) with a combined 60 minute time limit, whereas each EP has only one writing assignment with either a 30 minute (Task 1), or a 50 minute (Task 2) time limit. PT writing is clearly summative in nature whereas EP writing is more formative in nature. That is, PT writing exams are often done en masse with invigilators, strict time limits, no dictionaries and no prior discussion of the tasks. EP writing, on the other hand, is done in a single class/room environment, with hand-written notes and dictionaries available, and three possible questions given out in advance (of which one is chosen on exam day). Finally, PT writing exams may or may not get substantive feedback, depending on time limits.

The most important result over the study period is that there were no failing PT writing marks and this is important given that while EPs were marked by the researcher (the students’ instructor), each PT essay was marked by at least two other instructors (for inter-rater reliability). In addition, PT marks, on average, tended to improve over the study semester for all three classes. Because of the discrepancies between the EP and PT writing exams, no firm relationship can be described between the two, but it seems clear that the use of the editing mark system for the former was supportive of success on the latter.

The scheme used here is not meant to be the final word on editing signals, but more a way of approaching academic writing development. Indeed, the process of developing and using such a signalling scheme was found to be recursive and evolutionary. While only a few changes were made (early on) in the signalling scheme, these were important as a reflection of the real process of getting students to improve their writing, and support the notion that any scheme used to improved students performance needs an adjustment phase. Since there is a necessary lag, however, between writing and feedback, the use of editing marks affords instructors and students an opportunity to begin a process of prolonged feedback as students try to discover the source of their errors based on such hints. Thus instructors may assess knowledge gaps and provides the student with real time feedback - a staple in effective educational settings (Kulik & Kulik, 1988). To add to this process this researcher will always ask students what they think
in response to student questions. The point of this recursive process is the progressive and effective reduction of the affective barrier, ultimately enhancing the educational atmosphere.

There are a number of research and/or theoretical perspectives that support the use of the organic form of editing feedback advocated in this paper. These include the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, peer interactions as learning, conversation as learning, instructor as experts, multiple intelligences, concept mapping/schema, metacognition, and the value of unedited language.

No matter how one looks at such an interactive approach, being prepared to field student questions during editing feedback is at the same time very challenging and very satisfying. Having used editing marks of one sort or another for several years, I have learned that through ongoing questions and clues I can invite my students to vocally inform me often and enthusiastically about what they know and especially about what they do not know about writing. This opportunity to combine the elements of writing and speaking in an EFL setting is very satisfying, both professionally and personally.

Conveniently, there are many editing schemes available online, all of which seem to have their merits. The most important thing a writing instructor can do when considering what type of scheme to choose or develop is to take into account the needs of his/her students and to be consistent and clear with its use.

References


Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing Limited.


