Avoiding the Proofreading Trap: The Value of the Error Correction Process

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Introduction

The cultural informant role as sketched by Judith Powers, in her article “Rethinking Writing Center Conferencing Strategies for the ESL Writer,” was warmly received in our writing center when I introduced it shortly after her article appeared in 1993. With ESL students comprising a steady 30% to 40% of our clients, we had had plenty of experience with feeling not only the inadequacy of nondirective tutoring for meeting the needs of non-native writers but also the uneasiness of sessions that strayed from that approach, by then synonymous with effective one-to-one work (Brooks 1; Ashton-Jones 31-33; Shamoon and Burns 135-36). The cultural informant role endorsed by Powers gives writing center tutors flexibility for meeting specific needs of ESL students not met by the nondirective writing center ideal. With their many cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic differences, ESL students often lack the knowledge to engage in the question-and-answer approach to problem-solving used in most writing centers (Powers 40-41). And the read-aloud method for discovering sentence-level errors, frequently productive for native speakers, provides little help to ESL students who lack the ear to hear their own errors (Powers 41-42). The value of the cultural informant role, then, is that it validates sharing information about English that these students have no way of knowing on their own.

Yet after several semesters of basking in this more flexible approach, many of us on the staff, including graduate assistants in both English and Linguistics as well as practicum students, began to feel that too often this role, at least when sentence-level errors were concerned, tended to translate into the tutor editing and the student observing. Katherine Purcell, in her recent article “Making Sense of Meaning: ESL...
and the Writing Center,” discusses how to avoid the all-too-familiar problem of the tutor’s “race against time” to fix the ESL student’s sentence-level errors (1). Purcell’s aim here is to shift the focus of the ESL session from difficult-to-resist, sentence-level errors to more meaningful idea-related issues; both tutor and ESL student become not only cultural informants but also “explorers” of ideas (3). Ideas and their development are, without doubt, the place to begin work on a piece of writing, as much with ESL as with native speakers. Sometimes that is forgotten in the face of reading English that does not “sound right.” Yet with many of the more advanced ESL clients using our Writing Center, the ideas were already essentially in place. Thus the issue for us was not how to transcend the temptation to focus on sentence-level errors but rather how to move the sentence-level tutoring process beyond the tutor-as-editor dynamic to a dynamic that at once guides and involves the student in learning to self-edit. A practicum student several semesters ago summed up nicely the question some of us had begun to ask: “When do we stop informing students of the rules and begin helping them to form their own?”

The question came to a head when an undergraduate tutor came to me with a tutoring problem that clearly etched the limits of the cultural informant approach if used exclusively, that is, without follow-up strategies for helping ESL students apply the information their tutors have provided. This particular tutor was working each week with Ying, an upper-level ESL student, on brief form letter assignments for a Business Administration course. The problem was that, with such brief formulaic assignments and his relative proficiency, he had literally no whole-essay issues except, perhaps, for an occasional transition problem—whereas he had a number of sentence-level errors, some interfering with meaning, some not. The tutor felt the conferences were deteriorating into tutor-centered editing sessions with her identifying the errors, if he was unable to do so, then suggesting a range of alternative revisions, again if he was unable to do so. She was serving as his “cultural informant”—giving him “[her] language, not [her] ideas” (Petit 119)—but toward what end? Although he was likely benefiting in the sessions through conversing with her in her language, he was not, she could see, gaining techniques to help him increase his involvement and control over the revision process for future sessions.

Certainly, the cultural informant approach has the potential to provide students with information they need as second language learners. But when ESL students have no whole essay issues and relatively few sentence-level errors, the cultural informant approach, if it is the only strategy used, can begin to feel a lot like proofreading, as it did in this student-tutor relationship, with the students becoming increasingly passive, knowing that the tutor will be there to help. In this sort of situation, tutors may find it increasingly difficult, as did Ying’s tutor, to involve the student in learning.

Having faced similar—albeit less extreme—situations in the past, I decided that continuing to depend solely on the cultural informant role for such students would be ill-advised. Particularly for sessions with relatively proficient ESL writers, we needed to explore strategies for helping students learn to self-edit. Toward this end, I met with several of the graduate assistants in Linguistics working in the Writing Center—among them Sharon Lorinskas and Kim Strain, my co-authors, and their advisor, Lise Winer—and we brainstormed self-editing strategies that could be used, particularly by the more advanced ESL students. The strategies we chose—use of a learner’s dictionary, minimal marking, error logs, and a self-editing checklist—are particularly suited to the individualized context of writing center sessions. Following our meeting, we put together a tutor training workshop on these techniques, a workshop that provided concrete ways to help ESL writers learn the self-editing process.

In this article, Kim Strain, Sharon Lorinskas, and I will argue the value of these strategies when integrated with the cultural informant approach. Particularly when taught within the context of the writing center, such strategies, we believe, can serve as the “more mechanical rule-based proofreading strategies” Muriel Harris and Tony Silva suggest are “necessary” to counter the lack of “native-speaker-like intuitions” in even the more proficient ESL students (535). Within the writing center’s one-to-one cultural informant setting, students can experience these error correction techniques not as a bombardment of yet more bits of knowledge about English that they must master but as strategies they have collaborated with the tutor to construct.

Later in this article, Kim Strain will review the process of introducing ESL students to use of a learner’s dictionary, minimal marking, and error logs, and Sharon Lorinskas will review her adaptation of the self-editing checklist and examples of using these techniques both in our Writing Center and in her classroom. First, however, I will discuss the background of these strategies as well as the pedagogical and ethical rationale for their use.

Ethical Rationale

The question answered by these strategies is, in one sense, purely pedagogical: How can we help students make the transition from being culturally informed to learning how to function more independently as writers? Yet there is also an ethical dimension in this need to help ESL writers become more independent. The ethical side is suggestively explored in a 1992 Writing Lab Newsletter article by Kate Gadbow. In this article, Gadbow recounts a tutoring situation in which she helps a Japanese M.A. student more than she intends when the student’s master’s thesis comes due: “I found myself becoming less and less Yumiko’s teacher and
more and more her editor” (2). The student completed her M.A., but when she interviewed for jobs in the U.S., she was turned down because of her lack of language skills and had to give up her career goals and return to Japan. Gadbow recognizes the cultural and personal reasons for her fall into the proofreading trap; from her conversations with Yumiko, she saw that Yumiko understood the material perfectly, yet had no way of translating her ideas effectively into standard written English. Since this problem was in no sense Yumiko’s fault, helping her was difficult to resist. Yet Gadbow also recognizes the sense in which this student was harmed by her focus as a tutor on helping her graduate rather than on helping her become more proficient in English.

Certainly not all ESL sessions that fail to promote independence in the writer have such momentous consequences. However, Gadbow’s article highlights the fact that though ethical considerations mandate a pedagogy adequate to the cultural and linguistic differences of ESL students, they also mandate strategies to help us help the students learn to help themselves. Gadbow ends her article by emphasizing that we can avoid the pressure to become proofreaders for ESL students “just by accepting the complexity of the relationship between language and thought, between one culture and another, and by helping students accept that real learning takes place bit by bit” (5). Our article, then, stems from the desire to share with tutors and their trainers a collection of practical strategies for developing bit by bit the error awareness ESL students need to self-edit; these are strategies for helping trainers, tutors, and students all avoid the frustrations of the proofreading trap.

Background and Pedagogical Rationale for the Self-Editing Strategies

Yet can this emphasis on strategies for heightening error awareness indeed help students like Yumiko and Ying gain control bit by bit over their sentence-level errors? By now, it is widely accepted that formal grammar when taught in isolation does little to help students acquire a language (Harris 118-119; Hartwell 106; Krashen 37; Leki 107). Yet a number of L2 researchers suggest the value of attention to grammar within the context of the individual student’s essays. Even Stephen Krashen, in asserting the limits of formal language learning, assigns it a role within the context of the writing process: “Conscious learning does not contribute to fluency, but has only one function: it can be used as an editor, or monitor”—though only if the learner has the time, focuses on form, and knows the rule (37).

Other L2 researchers such as Sharwood Smith, William Rutherford, Diane Larsen-Freeman, and Virginia Yip, while agreeing with Krashen on the primacy of practice, assert a greater instructional value for the attention of learners to sentence-level errors. William Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, in particular, argue for what they term “consciousness raising,” the deliberate emphasis on “drawing the learner’s attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language” (Rutherford and Smith 107): “…there is every reason to accept the older, intuitively attractive version which says that explicit knowledge may aid acquisition via practice” (Smith 58). Even L2 researchers, such as Ann Raimes, who actively support the importance of the writing process, value attention to sentence-level errors. While Raimes upholds the importance of exploring ideas first and then working on sentence-level issues within the student’s own work, she is emphatic on the need for the latter step: “Our students should be taught not only devices to focus on meaning but also heuristic devices to focus on rhetorical and linguistic features after the ideas have found some form” (“What Unskilled ESL” 247-248).

Diane Larsen-Freeman, another researcher who affirms the writing process, concurs, placing specific emphasis on involving the student in error and rule awareness: “While there are clearly times that error correction can be intrusive and therefore unwarranted (e.g., during communicative phase activities), at other times focused error correction is highly desirable. It provides the negative evidence students often need to reject or modify their hypotheses about how the target language is formed or functions” (293).

A number of researchers, including Kroll and Schafer, add the importance of self-correction to the emphasis on error and rule awareness (Lalande 145-147; Hendrickson 145, 148; Kroll and Schafer 140): “When students can make sense of their errors, coming to terms with them as the result of consistent and understandable strategies, they are more likely to try to change (without demolishing their self-concept). In our experience, helping students to understand the source of their errors can produce changes even in errors that resist drill” (Kroll and Schafer 140). The effectiveness of error discovery is supported as well in process-oriented classroom texts for ESL learners, including the well-regarded How English Works: A Grammar Handbook with Readings (x-xi) by process advocate Ann Raimes, and in texts for teachers of English as a Second Language such as Linda Bates’ Writing Clearly: Responding to ESL Composition (33-47).

The self-editing strategies Strain, Lorinsska, and I are advocating—use of a learner’s dictionary, minimal marking, error logs, and self-editing checklist—involve error awareness, identification, and self-correction, all affirmed by the above researchers as valuable supplements to the sheer practice of reading, writing, speaking, and listening essential to the acquisition of a language. These self-editing strategies are not original to our Writing Center. Richard Haswell, by his own admission not the first to employ the minimal marking technique, was at least the first to use the term “minimal marking” to define the process of check-marking errors in
the margin to help native speakers identify and correct them. A number of ESL researchers endorse a similar approach to error identification and correction with second language students (Hendrickson 148; Lalande 140; and Corder, and Ingram and Higgs as cited in Lalande 140).

Effective dictionary use by ESL writers is also emphasized by a number of scholars (Harris 99; Patton 1-4; Little 117-118). Not often cited, however, is the value of a learner’s dictionary that contains grammatical information and examples of usage shaped specifically to the ESL learner’s needs. And Rebecca Oxford is among the individuals to have advocated error logs in which students list, define, and correct their most significant errors, though she terms the process “self-monitoring” (161-162). Another ESL researcher, John Lalande, found effective a similar technique for heightening error awareness and error correction through what he termed an Error Awareness Sheet, kept by the student with the help of the instructor (143, 149). As to the self-editing checklist, Lois Matz Rosen, in her article “Developing Correctness in Student Writing: Alternatives to the Error Hunt,” provides a list of self-editing techniques for native speakers. Sharon Lorinskas has adapted this list specifically to the needs of second language learners. These four strategies provide a sequence through which tutors can help second language students learn to discover and correct their own errors.

Before turning to Strain’s and Lorinskas’ discussion of these techniques, I want to review briefly aspects of individualizing their use to the needs of specific students. As in any tutoring session, before deciding to employ strategies from our sequence, tutors should assess the student’s proficiency in English, degree of familiarity with grammar rules and terms, and problems concerning priority. Usually for sentence-level errors, priority should be given to global errors, that is, errors that block meaning, and, only secondarily to local errors, errors that distract but do not block meaning (Bates 34-35). Another consideration in deciding the priority of a specific error is the degree to which it stems from breaking a rule (Hendrickson, “Error Correction” 361); extensive emphasis on errors not governed by a rule, such as preposition errors, can be frustrating and unproductive. Prioritizing errors, a process Kim Strain talks about in more detail, is particularly important since students working with tutors on too many error types may become overloaded and unable to process the material covered (Leki 21). However, the more students know about the rules of grammar (and it is fairly common for ESL students to know more about grammar rules than most native speakers), the easier it will be for them to cover more types of errors and make progress in learning to self-edit.

Just as essential as the evaluation of errors to the tutor’s decision to use these strategies, however, is an evaluation of the confidence and motivation of the individual student since, as writing center professionals well know, such factors affect the student’s ability to learn. If a student lacks the necessary confidence and motivation, attempting to make the transition to these independent self-editing techniques might prove frustrating and ultimately counterproductive. Not surprisingly, a number of researchers, including Chaudron, Foss and Reitzel, and Leki, affirm the importance of confidence and motivation to second language learning (Chaudron 134; Foss and Reitzel 440; Leki 13). In a study specifically on the effect of error explanation by ESL students, Margaret Robbins found that a “learner’s attitude and motivation, personality, and past language learning history” helped determine the effectiveness of having students locate, correct, and explain each error (cited in Hendrickson, “Error Correction” 362). Clearly, writing center tutors, getting to know students as they often do, are in a particularly good position to assess the student’s level of confidence and motivation. Another issue to remember in considering sentence-level work is the stage in the writing process. Barbara Kroll reminds us, as does Ann Raimes (“Anguish” 81-82), that sentence-level editing while working on first drafts can “[exacerbate] a writer’s insecurities” as well as distract the writer from more important, whole-essay revisions (260).

Yet while writing center tutors should be sensitive to the affective dimensions that may influence the success of specific strategies, they should not let such concerns stop them indefinitely from trying out these self-editing techniques—either singly or in sequence. For given the one-to-one potential for assessing student needs and fine tuning strategies to address those needs effectively, writing center tutors are among the best suited of university resources to diffuse anxiety and indeed build the self-confidence and knowledge ESL students require to try out such processes that at first may seem dauntingly technical and time-consuming. To help a student gain confidence and internalize the knowledge necessary to try out a self-editing process, the tutor may discuss parts of the process with the student, model how the process works, and then gradually involve the student in using it. As Purcell notes, learning is a social activity, and it is important that writing centers take full advantage of the social dimension of one-to-one work within the context of sentence-level as well as whole-essay tutoring (5). Collaborative application of the sentence-level editing strategies introduced by Strain and Lorinskas in the next sections of this article can allow the tutor and student to do just that.
Kim Strain

Initiating the Student’s Self-Editing Process

The strategies presented in the remaining sections of this essay may be introduced with an ESL student either singly or as a sequence, depending on the student’s needs and the amount of time the tutor has to work with the student. In either case, the idea is to build the student’s self-editing skills. After the tutor and student have diagnosed and prioritized the student’s errors, the sequence would usually begin with use of a learner’s dictionary and minimal marking. The next step would be to help the student gain greater metacognitive control over the information from the learner’s dictionary through creation of an error log. With the increased control, the student would be ready to try the self-editing checklist, a process that Sharon Lorinskas will present in the final section along with examples of her use of these strategies with ESL students.

Using a Learner’s Dictionary and Minimal Marking

One way to promote the self-editing skills of ESL students is to help them become accustomed to using a good learner’s dictionary as both a reference book and an active learning tool. Yet why a learner’s dictionary? Why not a good dictionary for native speakers? Certainly, a dictionary for native speakers contains information also useful to the learner. Webster’s New World Dictionary resembles the material available in a native speaker’s dictionary, such as Wayne’s, five pieces of information are available in Webster’s to help the ESL student: pronunciation, derivations, labels, parts of speech, and meaning (1-4). However, in our own Writing Center, we have discovered that ESL students need additional information because of the cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic differences between their L1s and L2s and their consequent lack of the grammatical and syntactic knowledge needed to write a readable, coherent composition.

To help students acquire the knowledge they need, tutors in our Writing Center use the Longman Dictionary of American English rather than a dictionary such as Webster’s; the former provides invaluable grammatical and syntactic information which dictionaries for native speakers lack. Such information is reviewed in two categories of the “Preface” to the Longman’s: “Understanding the Grammar” and “Using the Word Correctly” (xi-xi). Much of the information in the first category resembles the material available in a native speaker’s dictionary, such as a lexical entry’s part of speech and its word family as well as the plural form of nouns and the type of verb (transitive, intransitive, and linking). Other information in this section, however, is not provided in the typical native speaker’s dictionary. If the word is a phrasal verb, the learner’s dictionary shows the student both where an object is placed in relation to the phrasal verb’s preposition and whether the object for phrasal verbs can be animate, inanimate, or both, as in “check on somebody” or “rinse something out” (xi).

Almost all the information in the second category in Longman’s “Preface” differs from that in a native speaker’s dictionary. While examples of a particular word’s usage are supplied by all standard dictionaries, Longman’s provides far more complete and easy to use examples. For instance, common phrases or grammatical patterns using the target word are included in the lexical entry for the word and highlighted in bold in the context of a complete sentence. For example, for the first meaning of the word “certain,” the following examples of its grammatical use are given: “I’m not certain (that) he’s telling me the truth./ No one was certain what to expect./ Are you certain about that?” (xi). There are also frequent entries providing usage notes on such matters as the distinction between words close in meaning. Following a full page and a half of entries on the verb “to make,” and all its associated phrasal verbs, there is an extensive usage note, complete with examples, distinguishing the use of “make” and “do,” a distinction that can be difficult for a native speaker to explain (490). These notes emphasize not only correct but also incorrect usage, as in the lexical entry for the word “list” where the sample sentence, “Butter wasn’t on the shopping list,” is followed by “Don’t say: ‘in the list’” (475).

To help students take advantage of the available information, we have designed a technique called “Dictionary Detective.” This collaborative strategy guides both tutor and ESL student in effectively using the lexical entries in most learner’s dictionaries, helping the tutor, on the one hand, avoid proofreading for the ESL student and helping the ESL student, on the other hand, begin acquiring the awareness to self-edit. Before using this technique in a tutoring session, the tutor should determine the level of the student’s grammatical and syntactical proficiency in English, his or her attitudes and goals, and then prioritize with the ESL student the target features used in error.

According to Bates, Lane, and Lange in Writing Clearly: Responding to ESL Compositions, two types of errors should receive high priority: global errors, that is, errors that affect comprehension of the text, and frequently recurring local errors, that is, errors that do not affect comprehension but become important because they occur with some frequency (34-36). Global errors include 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, or unclear message (35). Of those global errors, the two or three that the ESL student misuses most frequently
should be addressed first to avoid overwhelming the student. Local errors, which distract but do not impede meaning, are less serious and are usually addressed only after the most frequent global errors have been corrected. Local errors include incorrect subject-verb agreement, incorrect or missing article, problem with the singular or plural of a noun, wrong word choice (including prepositions), wrong word form, or non-idiomatic usage (Bates 35).

Errors other than a student’s serious and frequent global errors may also be addressed, depending on the student’s attitude, goals, and level of proficiency. In most cases, tutors are likely to base the decision about the kind and number of errors to be addressed first on the student’s level of proficiency since a student’s attitude and goals are not as readily defined. Bates, Lane, and Lange explain that higher proficiency students with mostly readable prose may be able to work productively on local errors as well as their most serious global errors, whereas low proficiency students with many global errors and incoherent passages may be able to focus on only one or two global errors at a time (37). At the same time, if the student is confident and able to articulate his or her goals to the tutor, these factors may, to some degree, override the level of proficiency as the determining factor for the priority of a session (Bates 37). For instance, confident writers with clear goals, even if not highly proficient, will probably be able to address more errors at one time with more independence from the tutor than a less confident writer of greater proficiency.

After the tutor has determined the student’s proficiency in English and his or her attitudes and goals and has prioritized with the student the target features used in error, the tutor can introduce the five steps of the “Dictionary Detective” technique for using the learner’s dictionary. To make the process as clear and meaningful as possible, I will explain its use in the context of a writing sample by a hypothetical student with ongoing problems with transitive/intransitive verbs:

After the thief robbed, he ran himself away quickly. Luckily, an old man tripped with his stick and the policeman caught the bad man.

In working with a student on the above sentences using the Longman Dictionary, the tutor would first review or remind the ESL student of the target feature, transitive versus intransitive verbs, using the “Key to the Dictionary” (x-xii) and the “Dictionary Skills Workbook” (xiii-xxvi). Next, if the student seems ready, the tutor would test the student’s understanding of the target feature by asking the student to identify all instances of the target feature in error in a selected unit of writing. The length of this unit may vary from one sentence to an entire paragraph, depending on the confidence and proficiency of the writer. If the tutor recognizes that the student lacks the confidence or proficiency to detect the errors in the section selected for analysis, minimal marking may be used in a relatively short unit of writing to help the student locate the errors. On the other hand, a more proficient or confident writer may be asked to flag the errors him- or herself in a longer piece of writing.

The sample below indicates how a tutor might use minimal marking to help a less proficient or less confident ESL writer begin to identify and self-edit the three transitive and intransitive errors in the passage. Errors have been flagged with a check mark in the left margin.

✔✔ After the thief robbed, he ran himself away quickly.
✔ Luckily, an old man tripped with his stick and the policeman caught the bad man.

If, during the error identification process or the revision process that follows, it becomes clear that the student needs a firmer sense of the grammatical pattern for transitive and intransitive verbs, the tutor would then ask the student to look up in the learner’s dictionary one of the verbs from the student’s paper using the target feature in error and would point out the model sentences accompanying the lexical entry. Next, using as a guide the contrast between the pattern of the lexical entry’s sample sentences and the pattern of the student’s own sentence, the student would identify and rewrite any sentences in the passage not patterned as the dictionary model(s). If at any stage the student seems uncertain how to proceed, the tutor can model the procedure and thus help the student begin to internalize the process.

Below is the complete lexical entry from Longman’s for the verb “to rob,” the first transitive/intransitive verb in error in the hypothetical student’s passage:

rob /r b/ v -bed, bbing [t] to steal money or things from a person, bank, etc.: Two men were arrested for robbing a supermarket.

USAGE NOTE: rob and steal
Use these words to talk about taking something that belongs to someone else. Rob is used to describe the act of taking money or property from a person or place: Someone robbed the bank last night. / We don’t carry cash because we’re afraid we’ll get robbed. X DON’T SAY “someone stole a bank” or “we’re afraid we’ll get stolen.” Steal is used to talk about the actual things that are taken: Matt’s bike was stolen while he was on vacation. / They caught him trying to steal some cigarettes. X DON’T SAY “Matt’s bike was robbed” or “rob some cigarettes.” (697)
This lexical entry provides important grammatical and syntactic information which can be used by ESL students once they become familiar with the configuration and terms of the learner’s dictionary entries: “to rob’ is a verb; its past and present participle requires replication of the final consonant (‘robbed’ and ‘robbing’); it is transitive, and its definition is ‘to steal money or things from a person or a bank.’” The usage note for the entry explains in detail its semantic differences from the verb “to steal” (697). More importantly, though, for the hypothetical writer of this passage, the entry provides sample sentences which illustrate the appropriate syntactic patterns for revision of the sentence in question, for the fifth step of “Dictionary Detective.” For example, the presence of the direct object, “the bank,” from the model sentence above would accentuate for the student the absence of a direct object in the student’s own sentence. With the violated pattern made thus explicit, the student may be more likely to revise the sentence correctly by supplying the missing direct object: “After the thief robbed the woman, . . . .”

Error Logs

Once the ESL student has located, corrected, and reviewed the rules governing the priority errors using minimal marking and “Dictionary Detective,” the tutor can introduce error logs, a strategy for recording and analyzing those errors and gaining metacognitive control over them. Error logs are personalized dictionaries of the student’s most frequent or serious errors, created and maintained by the student with guidance from the tutor. As with the minimalist marking and “Dictionary Detective” technique, the tutor’s work with the student is central to the log’s effectiveness. It is the process of collaboration with the tutor rather than just the created product that reinforces the student’s understanding of the issues recorded and thus helps him or her learn how to self-monitor for errors.

Creating error logs is probably most successful in the context of regular weekly appointments, given the continuity of reinforcement consecutive appointments can offer. However, if the entire staff of a center is trained in helping students with error logs and keeps written records of every session, then constructing a log in a series of drop-in visits would indeed be workable. It would be especially important, though, in the context of drop-in sessions, where tutors may feel the pressure of the single visit format, to limit the number of log entries so as to balance the student’s short-term goals for the drop-in visit with the longer-term goals of the error log. While at the outset logs may involve significant involvement from the tutor, in the long run they promote student independence both in and outside the tutoring session.

If a tutor decides that an ESL student would benefit from keeping an error log, he or she would need to choose among the different types of formats: error log by assignment, by category of error, or by type of error, depending on the student’s needs. Error logs organized by assignment require a separate log for each student composition (see Appendices for sample logs). In this type of log, the errors are recorded and analyzed by using four columns labeled “Sentence with Errors,” “Error Category,” “Name or Description of Error” and “Correction of Error.” “Sentences with Errors” are the original complete sentences using the target feature in error. “Error Category” is the type of error being made, such as “subject-verb agreement.” “Name or Description of Error” is an explanation of the error and the particular rule governing it. “Correction” is the original sentence from the first column after revision. We recommend that all errors should be recorded in complete sentences to provide a clear context for the target feature and promote rule acquisition, especially in the columns labeled “Sentences with Errors” and “Correction.”

Error logs by category and type of error are organized in a similar manner, but some columns have been modified, added, or deleted to avoid redundancy (see Appendix B and Appendix C). Error logs by category are appropriate for a student who makes several types of errors which fall under punctuation and/or grammar categories. Error logs by type of error are appropriate for a student who makes only one or two types of error within a single error category. For example, in the previous writing sample an error log by type of error focusing on transitive and intransitive verbs seems to be more appropriate. Of course, the error log the tutor helps his or her student design can be a combination of two or more of these formats. It is important to remember that these logs are designed for the individual ESL student and that they should therefore reflect that student’s individual needs.

Both the “Dictionary Detective” and the Error Log are initially time-consuming for both the tutor and the ESL student. However, once the tutor has introduced these strategies and guided the ESL student through their application, the student should be able to begin to practice and use them independently. The student practicing these techniques learns to self-monitor, and the tutor fostering their use goes a long way toward avoiding the sort of proofreading to which Yumiko’s and Ying’s tutors reluctantly succumbed.

Sharon Lorinskas

Applications: Promoting Self-Editing

While a learner’s dictionary and error log are primarily useful for proficient and confident ESL students, they may also be used, with
additional guidance, for less proficient and less confident ESL students making any type of grammatical or syntactic error, global or local. Moreover, these strategies can be used in both tutoring sessions and classrooms. An introduction to the learner’s dictionary is included in all our 101 composition classes for international students, and it is a required book in the intermediate and advanced composition classes as well.

In the Writing Center, a few copies of the Longman’s dictionary are available, and I always have one handy when tutoring ESL students. If a student has not learned to use the dictionary in one of our composition classes, I explain the symbols, help pages, and sample sentences, and ask the tutee to refer to the dictionary when correcting errors.

I have used error logs primarily with students in the advanced composition course. This class sometimes includes students who are working toward an M.A. TESOL degree. Many of this latter group have some past English teaching experience, and all of them do practice teaching while in the TESOL program. Although these students typically have studied English for several years and are well versed in the rules of English grammar, they often make many sentence-level errors.

This apparent paradox is consistent with findings from Seliger’s 1984 study investigating the distinction between learning and acquiring a language, as reported in Hartwell (361). Seliger found “no correlation between the ability to state” the rule for pairing either “a” or “an” with a noun, “and the ability to apply it correctly” (361). He concluded that knowledge of rules in and of itself is of no “heuristic value” unless the rules have been internalized. Using the learner’s dictionary and error log techniques discussed by Strain may promote the development of this internal monitor.

One student in the advanced composition class seemed to make some progress in error monitoring through these techniques. “Mi-Young,” an ESL student from Korea in the first year of our M.A. TESOL program, understood English rhetorical style and grammar rules, but nevertheless made numerous grammatical errors in her writing, especially on in-class essays. She began using an error log organized by error types and was soon able to see the pattern of her most significant problems. Although her writing did not become error-free, the number of errors was reduced significantly, by an estimated 35%.

However, the ultimate goal for our students is not error-free drafts, since that is not a realistic expectation even for native speakers, but rather the ability to edit their own work. The self-editing checklist, adapted from Rosen to target the particular problems of ESL learners, is another tool that can be used in conjunction with dictionary work and the error log to promote student independence. Although this checklist is available in our Writing Center as a handout for students to take home, we advocate that the tutor work with the tutee at each step of the self-editing process, at least until the student is comfortable with it. It is important also that editing be done at the appropriate stage of the writing process, that is, as the last step, after issues of organization, coherence, and flow have been addressed. Below, then, is the self-editing checklist with suggestions for tutor involvement at each point.

How to Edit Your Own Essay

1. Ask yourself, “What mistakes do I make most often?” If you are not sure, start to keep an error log.

[As suggested by Strain, use of minimal marking and the error log are important preliminary steps in increasing student self-awareness of grammar problems. The tutor’s role is crucial in helping students not just to identify and understand their errors but also to prioritize the errors’ severity. As Strain notes, it is more important to correct global errors which interfere with comprehensibility of the text. Therefore, a count of the errors marked by the tutor or teacher is not enough. For example, a native speaker of Chinese may have ten missing articles and six verb tense or voice errors, but since the latter are global errors, they should be given priority.]

2. List at the top of your paper the three most frequent errors you make that deserve priority.

[Advanced students may have fewer than three frequent errors; intermediate students may have more. It is again important in the latter case to evaluate and prioritize the errors.]

3. Read through your paper looking only for the first, most common error. (Using a ruler or piece of paper to cover everything but one line at a time can help focus attention.) Circle all suspected errors of that type.

[The point of this step in conjunction with steps 4 and 5 is to focus on one problem at a time in order to reinforce each grammatical point and make the process less overwhelming for the student. If a less proficient student has many errors of multiple types, the tutor may suggest ignoring one or more types of local errors altogether. Tutoring time limits and paper deadlines as well as the threat of overloading the student may in fact make it impossible to produce a grammatically perfect paper.]
4. Next, repeat step three looking only for your second most common (or more serious) error.

[An additional suggestion the tutor might make to the student is to use a different color ink for each error type. The visual impact of different colored inks serves as a heuristic device to help raise student consciousness of grammatical forms as recommended by Smith and Raimes and previously cited herein by Cogie.]

5. Repeat step three once again for your third most common error, if necessary.

6. If you have not already looked for verb problems, highlight or underline all the verbs in your paper.

7. Check all your verbs for:
   a. subject-verb agreement: Is the subject singular or plural? Does the verb form agree?
   b. modals (can, should, would, must, may): Did you use the base form of the main verb after the modal?
   c. “be” verbs: Check the tense. Have you changed the tense? If so, why? Is the tense appropriate for the meaning? Is the verb in passive voice? If so, should it be?

[The emphasis in steps 6 and 7 is on verbs because they tend to be sources of errors and because, as Strain notes, some types of verb errors are global in significance. Verbs can be a particularly thorny issue for students whose L1 does not indicate time by verb inflections, such as speakers of Chinese.]

8. AFTER you have followed these steps, you may ask a knowledgeable friend to read over your paper to look for problem areas.

[This final step would be employed by the student outside of the writing center. It is often necessary to inform ESL students that not all native speakers are knowledgeable about correct grammar, so they should choose their “editorial assistant” carefully.]

As with the error log, I have used the strategies from the self-editing checklist primarily with students in advanced composition classes and Writing Center tutees. Do these techniques work? Without formal studies, it is impossible to make definitive claims, but there is anecdotal evidence that at least some ESL students have found them to be effective.

One such student was “Yoshiko,” a Japanese graduate student working on her master’s research paper throughout the semester. She brought a draft of the paper to our first session. Her advisor had made suggestions for content revision, and the paper was generally coherent and well-organized. However, there were numerous sentence-level errors, including inconsistent verb tense, agreement errors, preposition usage, spelling, and punctuation. I used minimal marking to indicate some of the errors I had identified, then explained to her why I thought verb tense should be dealt with first. At the end of the first session, I asked her to highlight all the verbs in the paper, a process she began in the Writing Center and completed at home. At the next session, we began checking each verb for correct form, and I explained why it was or was not correct. Soon Yoshiko was able to identify errors on her own. Working through the steps of the self-editing guide, we repeated this process with each category of error and in two successive drafts of the paper.

The strategies worked well in this case for a variety of reasons. Yoshiko’s paper needed mostly sentence-level corrections, she had a fairly high level of metalinguistic knowledge, so she understood the analysis of her errors, and we had the entire semester to work on one paper. She was also highly motivated to improve her English.

Another tutee for whom the self-editing checklist seemed to work was Mi-Young, the Korean student described previously. In the next semester after completing the writing course, Mi-Young became my tutee in the Writing Center. By this time, Mi-Young was using the learner’s dictionary regularly. In our tutoring sessions, I reviewed the use of the error log and encouraged her to maintain an ongoing record of her problem areas. I had introduced the self-editing checklist in her composition class, but that environment did not allow for much individual guidance on its use. Therefore, when Mi-Young brought her first assignment to the Writing Center, I indicated errors in the margin with minimal marking, and we began working through the self-editing checklist. By this time, Mi-Young was taking practicum courses in TESOL, so she was tutoring other ESL students and keeping a journal of her experience. Not only did Mi-Young use these strategies to improve her own writing, but she also employed them as teaching techniques with her own tutees.

Conclusion

Each semester since our first ESL self-editing workshop, aimed at helping us avoid the proofreading trap, ESL training in our Writing Center has focused on bringing together the cultural informant role of tutors and their role in guiding ESL students in learning self-editing
strategies. Certainly, we cannot claim that integrating these two approaches has rid our staff of the “race against time” to fix ESL papers that Purcell warns against (1). The desire to help ESL students Americanize their inevitably foreign-sounding usage will continue to pull at us. And as Iloni Leki observes, “many of the most problematic, meaning-disturbing errors of ESL writers cannot be easily described, explained, and edited away” (107). Yet, often, a meaningful number of their errors can be.

The techniques we have offered here provide tutors with a way of tackling those problems so as to involve the ESL students themselves in understanding, recognizing, and knowing how to fix the errors, even if only tentatively at first. The cultural informant role alone, though of extraordinary value, does not offer support for such a transition to self-editing. And it can, if offered as the only approach, lead to more intervention than is productive for ESL students, many of whom, like Gadbow’s Yumiko, will at some point need a way to problem-solve on their own. While minimal marking, a learner’s dictionary, error logs, and the self-editing checklist are not cure-alls, they have filled a very real need at our Writing Center.

APPENDIX A

ERROR LOG BY TYPE OF ERROR

Verbs: Transitive and Intransitive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student’s Name: ____________________________</th>
<th>Semester: ____________________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences with Errors</th>
<th>Correction</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After the thief robbed, he ran himself away quickly.</td>
<td>1.After the thief robbed the woman of her purse, (or) 1.After the thief robbed the woman and stole her purse, 2. he ran away quickly, (or) 2. he quickly ran away.</td>
<td>2: “to run”–no object 1: “to rob”–takes an object and frequently an “of” prepositional phrase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX B

**ERROR LOG BY CATEGORY**

**Grammar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences with Errors</th>
<th>Name/Description of Error</th>
<th>Explanation and Remarks</th>
<th>Correction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After the thief robbed, he ran himself away quickly.</td>
<td>1 and 2—transitive vs intransitive verbs</td>
<td>1 “to rob”—takes an object and frequently an “of” prepositional phrase 2 “to run”—no object</td>
<td>After the thief robbed the woman of her purse, he ran away quickly. (or) he quickly ran away.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences with Errors</th>
<th>Name/Description of Error</th>
<th>Explanation and Remarks</th>
<th>Correction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have a bias against people who have a strong religious belief. I don’t have any particular religious beliefs, so these people are kind of strange to me.</td>
<td>unclear referent</td>
<td>It is not clear whether “they” refers to “people” or “beliefs.”</td>
<td>I have a bias against people who have a strong religious belief. I don’t have any particular religious belief, so these people are kind of strange to me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences with Errors</th>
<th>Name/Description of Error</th>
<th>Explanation and Remarks</th>
<th>Correction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government control of the items of advertisement and the advertisement styles is different in each country.</td>
<td>subject-verb agreement 2 wrong preposition</td>
<td>1 Must find the correct subject 2 Look up the word “different” in the dictionary to see what prepositions are used with it.</td>
<td>Government control of the items of advertisement and the advertisement styles is different in each country.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences with Errors</th>
<th>Name/Description of Error</th>
<th>Explanation and Remarks</th>
<th>Correction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As I have seen in the news and television, the buildings in the U.S. are very high.</td>
<td>verb tense 2 word## 3 missing article</td>
<td>1 Incomplete tense words/verbs</td>
<td>As I have seen in the news and television, the buildings in the U.S. are very high.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX D

#### ERROR LOG BY ASSIGNMENT

**Grammar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student’s Name:</th>
<th>LiChang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assignment (Title):</td>
<td>Room Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft #:</td>
<td>@</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences with Errors</th>
<th>Error Category</th>
<th>Name/Description of Error</th>
<th>Correction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Their</em> is a pile of <em>cardboards</em> in the box.</td>
<td>spelling, spelling (plural)</td>
<td><em>Their</em>/<em>there</em> usage, non-count noun made plural</td>
<td><em>There</em> is a pile of <em>cardboard</em> in the box.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In front of <em>the</em> kitchen is a <em>sink</em></td>
<td>grammar</td>
<td>missing definite article</td>
<td>In front of <em>the</em> kitchen <em>is</em> a <em>sink</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncle Kwok went to his own place at the sewing machine, he took off his coat and hung it up on a coat rack against the wall.</td>
<td>punctuation, grammar</td>
<td>comma splice (comma instead of period), missing preposition</td>
<td>Uncle Kwok went to his own place at the sewing machine. <em>He</em> took off his coat and hung it up on a coat rack against the wall.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Works Cited


Let me start right off with a disclaimer, because part of me is very skeptical about what I say here. Talking about “men” and “boys” makes me uncomfortable. I do not like stereotypes. I am not a sociologist who talks about people as groups. I am, rather, an English teacher and a writer who is concerned with characters. And characters, whether female or male, flow out along a wide continuum of behavior, which seems only at its stereotypic worst to be gender-based.

That said, I also know quite certainly that there are times when I shake my head and bemoan some “guy thing” at Gilman, the boys’ school where I teach, that I know I will never appreciate or even begin to understand. So, I am going ahead with this analysis of the ways in which the structure and practice of writing centers may be uncomfortable, difficult, even anathema to many boys and young men. I hope such an analysis may help me understand why, after almost six years of building a highly respected writing center in the high school at Gilman, our use is still hovering at about one-third capacity.

My first reaction to under-utilization was to push the Writing Center on those reluctant boys who did not know what was good for them: better PR, allowing teachers to require attendance, greater visibility. I also have tried to change the boys’ behavior: make them more willing to ask for help, better at planning ahead, more internally motivated. It has taken me longer than I like to admit to realize that rather than trying to change the boys, perhaps we should try changing some of our practices in the Writing Center, perhaps we have been too much lace and not enough locker room.

So, I have begun reading about boys and men—what they are like, and how they learn—and about writing centers—particularly the ways in which we are very feminized places. The researchers’ observations and some of my own may invite us to reflect a bit on the practices we adhere