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

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A B S T R A C T

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
splice; dangling modifiers; fragments; lowercase; punctuation; pronoun reference or agreement; run-on sentences; and spelling. In general, the authors recommend marking neither local nor other errors. Teachers are, however, encouraged to mark the errors that appear most frequently in student work.

A more flexible approach is advocated by Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) guidebook *Teaching ESL Composition: Purpose, Process, and Practice*. Citing the works of Ferris (1995a), Hendrickson (1980), and Lane and Lange (1999), they reiterate the advantages of selective error treatment; Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) also summarize what some believe are its disadvantages. For instance, some second language acquisition researchers (i.e. Scarcella, 1996) believe that leaving errors untreated could lead to their fossilization. Drawing on empirical evidence from Frodsen and Holten (2003) among others, Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) thus suggest a combination approach: selectively marking errors on preliminary drafts and marking them comprehensively on the final draft. In regard to which errors to mark, *Teaching ESL Composition* advocates marking those that are global, frequent, and stigmatizing. The authors define these types of errors as context-dependent and urge instructors to judge them based on the extent to which they interfere with the intelligibility of the text.

There are potential challenges in implementing either of these approaches. With Bates et al. (1993), which errors to mark is clearly defined, but why certain errors are considered more “global” than others is not. For example, a misplaced comma can sometimes interfere with meaning, as can an incorrect article and certainly a “wrong word.” However, these types of errors would be categorized as “local” or “other” according to this system and should not be marked unless frequent. In addition, some of the “global” categories are not defined. What, for instance, is the meaning of “unclear message”? Likewise, in Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), what is considered “stigmatizing” is not explained. Neither guidebook provides an unambiguous method of calculating error frequency other than reading through a text and determining it mentally.

The nebulous quality of selective error treatment has not gone unnoticed in literature. Writes Ellis (2009a), “There is no widely accepted theory of grammatical complexity to help teachers (or researchers) decide which rules are simple and portable or to determine which features are marked” (p. 6). Ferris (2010) also questions the number of error types that should be treated. She writes, “How many features can optimally be treated in a research study (and, by extension, during a writing language courses), and which ones? From a L2 writing perspective, it seems fair to say that 1 or 2 features are too few and 15–20 features are probably too many” (p. 196).

This difficulty in implementing selective error treatment may even contribute to some instructors’ avoiding it in favor of a comprehensive approach. Lee (2008), for instance, studied the extent to which Hong Kong secondary teachers actually employ recommended feedback practices. Among the findings was that only 20.8% percent of participants always mark errors selectively, and 6.3% sometimes mark errors selectively. Lee (2011) sought to identify which factors affect the adoption of selective error treatment and other best practices. The results indicated that teacher training, support by school officials and parents, practical constraints, and the feasibility and outcome of change influence how well instructors can implement instructional practices. However, even instructors determined to use selective error treatment can find it challenging. Guénette (2012) described teacher trainees’ reported difficulty of choosing which error types to mark, worry that not marking an error would lead to its retention, and concern that students would perceive them as lazy or incompetent if errors were left unmarked. As a result, Lee (2013) identifies the amount of written corrective feedback to provide as a finding from second language writing research that has not been well applied in practice, particularly in EFL contexts.

Another issue with selective error treatment is students’ perceptions of it. In Leki’s (1991) survey of 100 ESL students, she found that most students preferred a comprehensive approach to error treatment; in fact, 70% wanted all errors, major or minor, to be marked. Summarizing students’ attitudes, she wrote, “The English teacher’s job, it would seem, is to mark errors” (p. 208). In Oladejo’s (1993) study, he also found that the majority – 62.8% – of participants disagreed that comprehensive error correction can cause frustration and discourage learners from using the target language. These results were echoed in the work of Lee (2005), who found that 82.9% of her 320 participants preferred comprehensive error treatment. In follow-up interviews, participants explained that they felt comprehensive error treatment helped them better address their errors.
This study will therefore not only extend previous scholarship on student perceptions of selective versus comprehensive error treatment but also, by employing qualitative research methods, more deeply explore the challenges of implementing a selective error approach among a novel group of participants: graduate student instructors. Guénette (2007) describes the value of such descriptive investigations. She writes, “The merit of these studies is that they reveal other dimensions of feedback, such as students’ ability to engage with feedback, the type of errors that benefit from feedback, the inconsistency of feedback provided by teachers, students’ perceptions and preferences, and individual differences” (p. 50).

3. Research design

The participants in this study include three instructors and 19 students of three sections of a first-year composition course for international students at Grant University1, a large R1 university located in the Midwestern U.S. According to the Institute of International Education’s report from the year the study was conducted, Grant University’s international student population is notable: it was ranked fourth highest among all colleges and universities in the U.S. and second among public institutions.

All three instructor participants were doctoral students in the ESL/second language studies program within the Grant University’s English department at the time of the study. Prior to teaching this course, all had also taught at least two semesters of the university’s mainstream composition course – international students self-place in one of the two to fulfill the university’s composition requirement – and participated in a two-semester practicum on teaching composition. They otherwise differed in terms of gender, nationality, native language, and previous experience teaching second language writing.

The first instructor participant, Mia, is female and is originally from South Korea. At the time of the study, Mia was teaching first-year composition for international students for the sixth semester. Her previous experience teaching second language writing included six years as a private language tutor of middle and high school students and one year of teaching integrated English skills at the post-secondary level in South Korea. The second instructor participant, Olive, is a female native of Taiwan. Olive was teaching the course for the fourth semester at the time of the study; she had also taught a TOEFL writing course at a private institution in Taiwan prior to coming to the United States. Ryan, the third instructor participant, is male and was the only participant from the U.S. and the only native English speaker in not only this study but also among all the instructors of first-year composition for international students during that semester. Ryan was teaching this course for the first time. His previous experience teaching second language writing included one semester of a pre-introductory ESL composition course at a U.S. university and, at a Chinese university, one integrated skills classes and one academic writing class designed especially for English majors.

Of the nineteen students interviewed, eleven were from Mia’s class, six were from Olive’s, and two were from Ryan’s. Eleven of the students were male, and eight were female. Ages ranged from 18 to 23 years, with an average of 19.8 years. Four countries were represented: China (8); Malaysia (6); South Korea (3); and Indonesia (2). At the time of the study, student participants had been studying English from six to fifteen years, with an average of 11.3 years. The range of time living in the U.S. was eight months to five years; fourteen of the nineteen student participants had been living in the U.S. eight to nine months when interviewed. The students’ majors included: some type of engineering (8); actuary science (2); computer science (2); microbiology (2); and one each of accounting, animal science, economics, industrial management, and international agronomy.

Prior to the interviews, permission to conduct the study was granted by the university’s institutional review board. To recruit participants, I emailed all 12 instructors of the course and, once three instructors agreed to participate, I visited their classes and recruited students by explaining the study orally and through a letter. Students volunteered to participate via email.

Interviews of both groups were conducted outside of class and were loosely guided by a set of preliminary questions; follow-up questions were posed as necessary. The instructor participants were

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1 Grant University and the names of all participants are pseudonyms.
asked to describe: their approach to error treatment, focusing on how much feedback they give; how they developed this approach; and what they believe are its advantages and disadvantages (Appendix A). The student participants were asked to describe their current instructor’s approach to error treatment and their general preferences regarding instructor practices (Appendix B). Following each meeting, I took analytic notes, defined by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) as “not fully developed working papers but occasional written notes whereby progress is assessed, emergent ideas are identified, research strategy is sketched out, and so on” (p. 150–151).

Both instructor and student interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded, first using categories corresponding to the preliminary interview questions and then refined to include emergent topics and sub-categories. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), “The coding of data in terms of categories provides an important role in infrastructure for later searching and retrieval. It can also play an active role in the process of discovery” (p. 152). The resulting 70 codes were then anchored to relevant passages within the interview transcript. From instructor participants, I also collected such artifacts as syllabi and a range of samples of marked student work.

4. Results

4.1. Mia’s approach

On the first of three drafts, Mia typically comments only on content and organization and delays error treatment. However, she stresses that her approach is flexible. She said, “It depends on [the] kind of situation or student. If one student is making one type of error too much in his or first draft, then I mark it.” On the second draft, she marks every error in the first paragraph; errors in the rest of the paper remain unmarked. She does so by inserting a marginal comment – she provides feedback electronically – in which she identifies an error type and/or provides a rule. During the second draft, Mia also continues to comment on issues of content and organization. Mia supplements her written feedback with oral explanations during 15-minute individual conferences following the first and second drafts. On the third draft, every error is marked but throughout the entirety of paper. She said, “I think I am just one of those teachers who puts a lot of comments… I just cannot let it go.” Of the three instructors, Mia is the only one to use a comprehensive approach to error treatment.

Mia used to mark all errors on the second draft as well but started marking only the first paragraph primarily to save time. She learned of this approach from a senior instructor. Though she said she is somewhat aware of recommended error treatment practices in second language writing literature, she said she found it difficult to implement a selective approach. She said, “I find a lot of different types of errors in my students’ papers… I cannot only [focus] on one thing.” She added that marking comprehensively even on part of a paper allows her to more concretely determine what patterns of error types are and then share those patterns with students.

Mia does not believe that her approach to error treatment was significantly influenced by her own experiences as a second language learner. As a student, most of her writing assignments were brief, and although she thinks her past instructors comprehensively marked what few errors there were, feedback was generally minimal. Instead, her current approach is based on what works best for her as an instructor.

With this method, Mia believes there are benefits for not only her but the students, as well. She said, “I think they can see some patterns and then leaving some freedom.” However, Mia still thinks

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<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>First draft</th>
<th>Second draft</th>
<th>Third draft</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Comprehensive – first paragraph only</td>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Selective – first two pages only</td>
<td>Selective</td>
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<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Selective</td>
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that marking all errors is superior to a selective approach. She said she would mark an entire paper comprehensively if she had fewer students or more time.

Even though she has reduced the amount of feedback she gives, Mia admitted that she has gotten the impression that students can be overwhelmed by the number of comments she leaves. If she is giving what she thinks is too much feedback, she said she goes back and deletes those comments she finds most trivial. On the other hand, she worries that her students might have difficulty detecting errors in the unmarked areas of the text. Although she has never formally measured student attitudes toward her approach to error treatment, Mia speculated that some might also find it difficult to match an electronic comment to the relevant error, and the ultimate effect could be intimidating.

4.2. Olive’s approach

Like Mia, Olive comments only on content and organization on the first of three drafts and delays error treatment until the second draft. Olive also marks errors throughout just part of the second draft, but she differs from Mia in that, within the section she marks, she uses a selective approach. She said, “I always tell them that, ‘I would correct probably two thirds of the paper for you,’ and I would expect them to apply what they learned from the corrections and apply them to the rest part of the essay.”

Olive does not include grammatical or mechanical rules in her written feedback – she uses a pen – but will address them orally in conferences. Conferences are also where she summarizes what she believes are patterns in the types of errors individual students make; no comments regarding the most common types of errors appear on student papers.

According to Olive, her approach is one that she has developed herself over time. Despite being somewhat aware of the purported disadvantages of comprehensive error treatment from her coursework in second language writing, she used to mark all errors on the second and third draft. Olive’s current strategy of selectively marking only a portion of a student paper reflects her belief that students can rely too much on instructor feedback. “I would let them know that, ‘My job is not to correct every grammar mistake for you,’” she said. “I will specify... the major issues. If they keep committing the same errors, I would just point that out once and tell them that, ‘You need to go back and check it again to see that whether the rest of the paper have the same problems or not.’” Olive also felt that her past use of a comprehensive approach overwhelmed the students. “If they see there’s a lot of comments, they will kind of [grimace],” she said. “I don’t really want make them feel frustrated.”

Olive also believes that a selective approach encourages students to more closely read her comments and consider patterns in their errors. She said, “If I leave some part of the essay for them to work on their own, they will go back and read my comments because if I didn’t do that, I feel like that they didn’t really read my comments. So I spent a lot of time correcting their papers, but they didn’t really learn something.”

This is the reason that Olive started marking errors selectively on the third draft. However, instead of correcting errors overtly as she does in the second draft, she provides marginal comments that point out just the most general errors, something she is able to determine just by reading through the text. “When I started teaching... I tried to mark all the errors,” she said. “But then I realized that I feel that when I give students the final grade, they didn’t really care about their comments at all. Their focus is on the final grade.” She added that grades are probably the reason that most students seem to prefer comprehensive error treatment.

One of the challenges of Olive’s selective approach to error treatment, she said, is that some students underestimate their part in responding to it. She said, “I feel that there is kind of like a misunderstanding between students’ expectation and what we did. They would expect that you correct every mistake for them, and they would feel like after they fix all the mistakes, they should get a good grade.”

Student opinion is something Olive values, and she is always open to changing her approach depending on student need and preference. She said, “When you talk to students, you will know... whether the comments help them or not, and you can sense... whether they are happy with your comments or not, whether the comments help or not.”
4.3. Ryan's approach

Unlike both Mia and Olive, Ryan begins marking errors on the first of three drafts. His approach is also unique among the participants in that he addresses errors throughout the entirety of the paper on all three drafts.

Ryan used to delay error treatment until the second draft but felt students were not using the drafts as an opportunity to edit. He believes that extra feedback will result in improved accuracy by a student's final draft. He said, "If I have three drafts, and the students still make a really glaring error, then I feel like I haven't really done my job."

The form of Ryan's feedback varies. Using a pen, Ryan said he circles errors involving a single word, and if he cannot understand a sentence, he underlines it. Ryan sometimes provides a correct form or identifies the error type. The explicitness of his feedback depends on the type of error. Feedback also tends to be more indirect as the essay progresses. Ryan said, "The first time I see something, I will mark it." The next time he encounters the same type of error, he usually indicates it but will not provide the correct form or any clue as to the error's type. Occasionally, he will point out what he perceives as patterns in error types in either a marginal comment or as a final note. Ryan also primarily addresses error patterns in conferences. He said, "I try to supplement everything with a conversation."

Like Mia and Olive, Ryan's approach to error treatment has changed over time. He has always used a selective approach, but Ryan said he marks more errors now — he estimates that he addresses between thirty and sixty percent of all errors — than he did as a novice teacher. During Ryan's master's degree in TESOL, he had been instructed to focus on higher order concerns. However, once he began teaching in China, he learned that his students desired more feedback on sentence-level issues. He also felt errors were so numerous that he could not understand a student's intended message, and his minimal feedback was proving ineffective. He explained, "They didn't see it the first time. How were they supposed to find it the second time?"

As a result, Ryan began offering more feedback and has maintained this approach because he believes it contributes to improved accuracy. That said, Ryan is cognizant that even a selective approach can be overwhelming if many errors are marked. He said he adjusts the amount based on what he perceives students' attitudes to be, saying, "If I get the sense that they're frustrated, then I will try to back off a bit."

Much of Ryan's approach to error treatment has been influenced by past and current teachers who have provided detailed feedback. He said, "I do like to get that kind of feedback from someone I respect in the field who knows the expectations of the community better than I do. Maybe in a way, I feel like that's what part of my job is." Ryan added that he can still remember errors that were pointed out to him as far back as middle and high school and avoids making them now as a result.

Though second language writing research is not the primary influence on Ryan's approach to error treatment, he seems to be the most aware of it among the instructor participants. He knows, for example, that its general effectiveness has been debated but that instructors are usually advised to mark errors selectively, he believes, simply because it saves a teacher so much time.

Like Mia and Olive, Ryan is concerned that students can rely too much on instructor feedback, but he will continue to provide it to make future drafts more readable for himself and because it gives students satisfaction to see their accuracy improve. He also recognizes the high stakes sometimes involved with reducing the number of errors. He said, "I think that's something we don't tell the truth about to ourselves... About how much grammar, vocabulary does sort of at least give us the appearance of intelligent writing."

4.4. Student perceptions

Perceptions of when and to what extent Mia treats errors varied across her students. Seven of the eleven students interviewed from Mia's class reported that she begins addressing errors with the second draft. Three, however, said that Mia begins marking errors in the first draft, and one believed Mia only marks errors on the final draft.

Six of the eleven students claimed that Mia marks every or almost every error she encounters. Sam said, "She will practically check one by one. She's very meticulous on the grammar." If an error was not
marked, this group attributed it to an oversight. “Sometimes I just notice that some of my grammatical mistakes, she skips,” said Violet. “Maybe she overlooks or something.”

The other five described a more selective approach. There were several theories as to why Mia marked some errors and left some unmarked. Katie thought Mia left errors that students could easily address themselves. Jasmine thought Mia focused only on “major grammatical errors,” a possibility that was also raised by George. He said, “She told me that she cannot take care everything, every mistake you have, so she just kind of let you know some big stuff, and she will let me change every other stuff.” Fiona and David did not know why Mia marks some errors and not others, but David admitted, “I didn’t read all of them. I just saw a few of them, so I think she just marks a few of them.”

The six students interviewed from Olive’s class, however, provided a fairly uniform account of how she treats errors. Five of the six agreed that she usually delays error treatment until the second draft, when she then marks every error on only the first half of the paper. The sixth student reported that Olive starts marking errors beginning with the first draft and might not mark errors on the final draft. She said, however, “I’m not sure whether she marked it or whether my paper is correct.” According to Nina, Olive will also mark errors on the first draft but only if there are not problems with the content or organization.

According to Alexis and Nina, Olive’s approach to error treatment was explained clearly at the beginning of the semester. Said Gus, for example, “I can practice myself.” Diana was not exactly sure why Olive marks only a portion of a paper but guessed the same reason. “Maybe she wants us to realize our mistakes for ourselves so that we have the ability to evaluate ourselves... in the future,” she said. Wesley and Simon thought that marking only part of a paper was more of a time-saving measure. Wesley said, “It’s like fifteen people in the class, and she has to do it in one night, so she usually leaves the conclusion part and the second last paragraph.” Simon put more of the blame on himself. He said, “Maybe she doesn’t have much time. Because my English is not very good, so I also have a lot of errors.”

Ryan’s two student participants differ in their description of his approach to error treatment. According to Henry, Ryan corrects every error on every draft. Gia gave a more nuanced picture. She said that although Ryan does tend to mark the majority of errors on the first through third drafts, he will not correct an error that a student makes repeatedly. Instead, he will provide a marginal comment. Gia said, “I have some errors about tense. Usually, he’ll say, ‘You should use consistent tense.’ He won’t mark every single one of those.”

All students interviewed in this study reported valuing instructor feedback; not one reported that they would accept an instructor who marked no errors. Said Mia’s student Jacob, “I came in to learn. If the professor doesn’t make any changes or tell me what’s wrong with it, what’s the point of coming to school?” Mia’s student Fiona could not imagine any reason for a teacher to avoid marking errors other than laziness. Added Ryan’s student Gia, “I think they are kind of, like, irresponsible.”

Eighteen out of nineteen students also said instructor feedback was the first step in their out-of-class editing processes; Mia’s student David, who said he preferred to rely on his own intuition, was the one outlier. Indeed, for three students, instructor feedback was the only thing they reported using when addressing errors in second and third drafts. Said Mia’s student Layla, “I just write according to her comments.” When Olive’s student Diana was asked how she treats the areas Olive does not mark, Diana said, “I just leave it there. I didn’t change anything.”

All six of Olive’s students reported being satisfied with her method of error treatment – generally described as marking all errors on half of the second draft and all errors on the entire third draft – but two said that they would equally appreciate an instructor who marks errors comprehensively. Eight of the eleven students interviewed from Mia’s class and both of Ryan’s students said that they prefer teachers to mark errors comprehensively. Said Mia’s student Sam, “We can’t say [instructors] can mark all the errors because we are humans, and obviously we miss some, but most of them would be nice because at least we know our errors if we keep making the same errors throughout the paper.” Mia’s student, Violet, said, “I would not like to practice editing myself because... I cannot see my own mistakes when I’m reading.”

In addition to believing that comprehensive error treatment will help them better understand how to avoid errors, several students admitted preferring it because it helps them get a better grade on their final paper. This was particularly true for the students of Mia, who was spontaneously described as a strict grader by five of her eleven students.
The three students from Mia’s class who said they preferred selective feedback did so for different reasons. Katie and Layla did not welcome comments or corrections of what they perceived as their personal writing style. Said Layla, “Sometimes, I have my own ideas and my own structure, but she just says, ‘It’s not clear’ or something like that. If she says that, she should provide more about why we should do this specific way.” Jacob simply felt that a selective approach better contributes to learning. He said, “Because if she marks all the errors for me, I probably not going to see that ‘Oh, I made an error!’ I just change it.” He therefore prefers that only his most frequent errors be marked.

Comprehensive error treatment was also described as potentially overwhelming or depressing by four students, including two who reported preferring it. When asked how he felt when he sees that all of his errors have been marked, Mia’s student, Wyatt, replied, “Of course, I feel bad. I feel bad at myself.”

5. Discussion

All instructor participants in this study seem to have struggled to some extent implementing a traditional selective approach to error treatment. Of the three, Ryan responds to errors in a manner that is most consistent with what is recommend by second language writing research and literature. He did, however, say that he marks more errors than what is typically advised. That instructors avoided or were challenged by applying selective error treatment is consistent with previous studies (i.e. Lee, 2011, and Guénette, 2012), but two instructors adapted to these difficulties with what I believe are idiosyncratic approaches: no literature that I’m aware of advocates responding to only a portion of the essay either selectively as Olive does or comprehensively like Mia.

It can therefore be argued that, although all instructor participants are familiar with best practices of error treatment, they consider it not as a prescription but, instead, as advice. Guided by the needs of their instructional context, beliefs about what contributes best to learning, and demands as graduate instructors, they adapt their approaches as necessary. Not one instructor interviewed for this study uses the same approach they used when they first began teaching.

Though they differ, the strategies used by instructors in this study allow them to avoid the three most significant weaknesses of a comprehensive approach to error treatment: the time that it takes to mark all errors, that it could overwhelm students, and that it removes all the onus of detecting errors from the student and places it with the instructor. If one of the primary responsibilities of the second language writing teacher is to promote independent editing skills, these instructors do that. A potential strength of Mia’s partially comprehensive approach is that, if errors in a portion of an essay are an accurate reflection of the error types in the essay as a whole, this approach could help some instructors more concretely determine what the most frequent error types are. It is telling, for instance, that it was time constraints that caused Mia to abandon her former strategy but that she did not choose to replace it with a more traditional selective approach: she maintains, like many of the student participants, that comprehensive error treatment contributes more to improved accuracy than a selective approach.

In regard to student attitudes toward error treatment, on the surface, the results of this study are consistent with earlier research that found that students preferred comprehensive feedback. However, it is noteworthy that all the students interviewed from Olive’s class accepted her approach of selectively marking only a portion of the total paper. This suggests that alternative approaches might be welcomed, as well.

It could be the case that Olive’s students were as satisfied as they were because, of the three groups, they seemed to best understand how and why she marks errors as she does. Indeed, among the most interesting findings in this study is that students’ descriptions of their instructor’s approach did not always correspond to the description provided by instructor. For instance, not one of Mia’s students said, as she did, that she marked only the first paragraph and left the rest for the students to edit themselves. One of Ryan’s students reported that he marked every error, while Ryan reports that he marks at most two-thirds of them. Olive’s students mostly agreed that she marked only the first half of the second draft, but most believed that, within the parts she addressed, all errors were marked. This finding echoes those from a study by Zhao (2010), who concluded that students did not always understand the significance of instructor feedback. This discrepancy also suggests that many students:
(1) do not know why their instructors mark errors as they do; (2) do not – as instructors feared – closely examine feedback, and (3) misunderstand what their own role is in the error treatment process. This is despite what instructors claim is sometimes very explicit explanation of their approach to error treatment in class and conferences.

Students’ lack of understanding about their instructors’ approaches to error treatment is especially significant when considered alongside another finding: that most students seem to possess undeveloped independent editing skills. This is consistent with Zhou (2009), who found that adult language learners were motivated to improve their English accuracy but lacked the knowledge and resources to effectively do so.

6. Implications and conclusion

The results of this study have several pedagogical implications. First, instructors should ensure that their students fully understand how and why they treat errors as they do. A situation where students believe that instructors are marking more errors than they actually are – and edit less as a result – can only breed frustration. Thus, in addition to orally describing error treatment practices to students in class or conferences, a clearly written policy of instructor practices could be included in course materials, such as the syllabus or website. An instructor may also develop assignments or quizzes to assess and reinforce students’ understanding of their approach to error treatment.

Another option is to have students participate in the design of the approach itself. After discussing selective and comprehensive error treatment and the respective advantages and disadvantages, students could decide as a class or individually the approach they would like their instructor to adopt. This is consistent with the corrective feedback (CF) guidelines suggested by Ellis (2009a). He writes, “Teachers should ascertain their students’ attitudes toward CF, appraise them of the value of CF, and negotiate agreed goals for CF with them. The goals are likely to vary according to the social and situational context” (p. 14). Anticipating that most students would select a comprehensive approach, instructors may choose not to include the option of marking every error throughout the entirety of a paper but may instead choose an approach like Mia’s as a compromise. The choices given to the students must represent only what the instructor is able and willing to do given time constraints and his or her beliefs about error treatment practices.

Students can also be more involved in the process of identifying and then addressing patterns of errors in their writing. An instructor could, for example, require students to keep error logs on which they tally how many errors of each type are marked in a given assignment. Although studies testing the effectiveness of error logs in improving student accuracy have achieved conflicting results (i.e. Hirschel, 2011; Ferris and Helts, 2000; Komura, 1999; Roberts, 1999), they do allow students to review the rules that pertain to their most frequent error type and edit for those types specifically.

Raising student awareness of patterns of error types when proofreading can be employed in other ways, as well. For instance, by requiring students to engage in reflective writing as part of a pre-writing activity or as a piece accompanying the final draft, students can be asked to look at the comments, marked errors, or where they missed points on previous assignments and describe what measures they will take or took to avoid those errors on the current assignment. Evidence supporting this activity was found by Suzuki (2009); in this study, written “languageing” – for example, reflection, explanation or diaries – was associated with improved accuracy on later drafts. Along the same vein, a former colleague asks students to choose three error types from a list she provides, and those are the only types of errors she will mark on the second draft of each assignment.

Finally, it seems that many students would benefit from being explicitly taught how to use self-editing strategies, something none of the instructors in this study had done. This could include giving students in-class opportunities to practice such strategies as: examining each sentence and its components individually, reading essays out loud, allotting time to address errors in their writing, revisiting their essays after a break, reading an essay backward, and adjusting the appearance of their text. More tips can be found in Ferris, 1999b “Teaching students to self-edit”.

With only thee instructor and nineteen student participants, a limitation of this study is generalizability. Further research would be necessary to determine if the strategies used by the instructor participants in this study are representative of instructors of second language writing as a whole
or if certain factors may influence the approach that they choose. For instance, would a large-scale survey reveal that instructors who are, like Ryan, native speakers of the target language more comfortable with a selective approach than those who are, like Mia and Olive, second language learners themselves? Is the gender of the instructor significant? Does the amount of feedback evolve as an instructor gains more experience? (Table 1).

It would also be valuable to investigate to what extent instructional context matters. Selective error treatment was avoided in an EFL context in Lee (2011); how frequently is that the case in ESL settings? The class itself may also play a role in how much feedback an instructor provides. The participants in this study are perhaps unique in that their curriculum affords the luxury of many student/teacher conferences. Is there a connection between how much feedback a teacher provides and the time they have to discuss errors in conferences? What about class size?

Clearly, selective versus comprehensive error treatment is also a topic that lends itself to further investigation. Longitudinal studies could, for instance, be conducted to compare the accuracy of students who receive comprehensive error treatment and selective treatment on whole or part of a paper. In his typology of written corrective feedback types, Ellis (2009b) identifies this as a gap in the literature. Referring to selective error treatment as focused and comprehensive error treatment as unfocused, he writes, “To date, there have been no studies comparing the relative effects of focused and unfocused CF. This is clearly a distinction in need of further study” (p. 102). Finding evidence that marking part of a paper comprehensively or selectively results in equal or better accuracy in student writing would offer an approach that saves time for teachers, respects student preferences, reveals patterns of errors, and offers students editing practice: all of the advantages and none of the disadvantages of both approaches.

Appendix A

Preliminary interview questions for instructors

1. Describe your current and past experience teaching second language writing.
2. Describe your current and past experience as a student of second language writing (if any).
3. Describe the process you use to mark errors on a student paper.
4. How did you decide to use this process?
5. How influenced have you been by outside sources – second language writing classes, literature, mentors, etc.?
6. How influenced have you been by your own experiences as a writer in a second language (if any)?
7. What are the advantages of your current process?
8. What are the disadvantages of your current process?
9. Have you ever used another process to treat errors? If so, why did you change to your current process?
10. What factors would lead you to change your current process of treating errors?

Appendix B

Preliminary interview questions for students

1. Where are you from? How long have you been studying in the U.S.?
2. Tell me about your experience studying English writing. What writing classes had you taken before English 106i?
3. How does your current instructor mark errors on your papers?
4. Have past instructors marked errors differently? How so?
5. How do you prefer your instructors to mark your errors?
   a. Do you want your teacher to mark all of your errors or just some?
   b. If you think only some of your errors should be marked, what types of errors do you want your teacher to mark?
c. Do you want your teacher to correct your errors, tell you what type of error it is, or just mark errors?
d. On what draft(s) do you want teachers to mark your errors?
6. Describe the process you use to address errors on your final draft. Do you consult any resources other than your teacher’s marks and comments?
7. Overall, how useful do you think marking errors is in improving your overall writing? Would you accept a teacher who did not mark any errors?
8. How important is grammar to the overall quality of your work compared to content, organization, and vocabulary?

References


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