

Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing

Review by J. Perry Christensen

Brigham Young University Hawaii, USA

TREATMENT OF ERROR IN SECOND LANGUAGE STUDENT WRITING.

Dana R. Ferris. The University of Michigan Press, 2002, Pp. 152, (\$16.00)

Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing is part of the Michigan Series on Teaching Multilingual Writers, edited by Diane Belcher and Jun Liu. The text is designed to be used in a language methods class or as supplemental reading for the seasoned writing teacher. It specifically concentrates on how to mark errors in order to provide L2 students with feedback on their written work. The book contains 152 pages, divided into 5 chapters with appendixes. In addition, after major sections and chapters, summaries provide useful synopses making it easy for the reader to review the key points.

The first two chapters are a review of the literature. Ferris describes studies which show how marking errors has no measurable effect on improving L2 student writing. Then she systematically refutes these studies by offering other studies which show that if error correction is used properly, student writing will improve. In these chapters, Ferris also defines terms. For example, she gives definitions for the terms “treatable” and “untreatable” errors. Treatable errors are linguistic components, such as verb tenses, which follow prescribed rules that can be taught. On the other hand, errors dealing with prepositions or articles, which do not have clearly defined rules and require more of a feel for the language, are classified as untreatable errors. Ferris puts these definitions to use in later chapters when she explains why a teacher would want to identify error types and how a teacher may want to approach each error type.

Chapter Three explains how the L2 writing teacher can prepare to treat student errors, which can be a daunting task. Ferris writes that sometimes a teacher may recognize that an error has been made, but not know why it is an error or be able to give a simple explanation because it is a complex grammatical mistake. By working with an experienced teacher and studying second language acquisition theory as well as grammar, Ferris says a teacher can be in a better position to make sound judgments in responding to L2 student writing errors.

The focus of Chapter Four is responding to student errors. Ferris talks about what kinds of errors should be marked and what kind of feedback may be appropriate once errors in a paper are identified. For example, Ferris proposes that direct feedback, or teacher correction of the error, be used for untreatable errors and for lower level language students who have not learned the grammar rules governing the error. For upper level students, Ferris advises using indirect feedback for treatable errors. Indirect feedback consists of marking essays by underlining errors, putting check marks in the margin next to lines containing errors, or using coded symbols above errors which suggest what kind of error was made. By using indirect feedback, the student is aware that there is an error and then has to exert some mental effort to fix it, thus investing in and gaining more from the learning experience. Ferris concludes the chapter by offering five wonderful suggestions for conserving energy and avoiding burnout. These suggestions alone put the book into the "must read" category.

In Chapter Five, Ferris examines the next step beyond marking errors. She discusses how making errors may be a sign of progression in acquiring a second language. Then Ferris proposes ways to overcome these errors. One of these ways includes developing mini lessons which address the errors the students are making. Another is helping students to self-edit by focusing on specific aspects of their writing. Ferris also offers suggestions for making peer editing more effective. This can be done through appropriate training and structured activities which are closely supervised by the teacher.

The appendixes provide additional information which adds to the book. Some of the items are examples of assignments for a teacher preparation course, error type definitions, error analysis sheets, and samples of student papers which have been marked.

Overall, the book is well-written and informative. By reading the book, one not only learns theory, but also many useful applications to incorporate into the classroom. Prospective teachers as well as experienced professionals will benefit from reading it.

About the Reviewer

J. Perry Christensen is currently the Writing Coordinator for the English as an International Language Program at Brigham Young University Hawaii.