

Targeted Correction for Written Assignments: A Win-Win Approach

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Overview

Almost all language teachers, collect, comment on, correct, grade and return written work of some form. Some students analyze and learn from the corrections. Other students file away or even throw away work without ever looking at it. Still others may look at the teacher's comments, become confused by all the markings, and give up. How do teachers feel when in some cases they spend more time on the assignment than the student did? How do students feel when there is so much red ink on the page that they cannot discern between the good parts and which parts need improvement? This paper seeks to outline a win-win approach for correcting written assignments to make both the teacher's time and the students' time more effective, useful and focused.

Students and teachers alike embrace the need for correction to improve accuracy. However, both groups also tend to shy away from correction because it can be perceived as overwhelming and time-consuming for minimal impact. Teachers struggle with questions such as: How much should be corrected? How native-like should writing be? Should every error be marked even when it is clearly beyond the student's current language skills to understand? How much time should be devoted to global or discrete-point corrections? What about organization and content? All of these issues are important; however, this paper will focus on an

approach, with variations, for discrete-point corrections in written assignments.

The basic approach begins before an assignment is given. The teacher can consider what points the students need to concentrate on, or what points or skills the students need to successfully complete an assignment. For example, if students are going to describe a room where they live, then focusing on the simple present tense and/or prepositions, as in, “there is a wooden bookcase under the window” could be a useful to target. In addition, the same assignment could be used for a higher-level class, or even a higher-level student in the same class, targeting adjective order and usage. So this approach allows for individualization and differentiation within a class without additional workloads being placed on the students or teacher. Next, including these items on a checklist, grading rubric or a peer-evaluation form could be useful. The checklist could also be developed or added to after the assignment is submitted to the teacher based on what the teacher finds when reviewing the work. Thus, before the student even undertakes the assignment, the teacher has already started to target review and practice items, and some criteria for grading when appropriate.

Another part of the teacher preparation for using this approach is to recognize that you do not need to mark or correct every error or mistake. Marking three to five items per page for written work tends to be most appropriate. By making fewer corrections, teachers can increase effectiveness by allowing the students to focus on the areas where they need the most work. It also reduces correction time so that feedback and additional assignments can be more individualized. The writing assignment, thus, becomes more of a teaching/learning tool and assigns more responsibility to the learner for correcting and learning. The reduction of red ink may also reduce the students’ affective filter and make the revisions and corrections more approachable for them. In this way, the students

become more a part of the process and not just a receiver of information via corrections. This approach and the rationale should be discussed with the students to help them feel secure with fewer corrections and more responsibility. Then the teacher is ready to assign some work.

Next the students receive the assignment and do the work. There may be a checklist, grading sheet or assignment paper for the students to refer to as they complete the task. If appropriate, there may be some time for peers to proofread the work for basic punctuation or basic grammatical and spelling errors. Any peer review or help should also be targeted so as not to overwhelm either reviewer or student. Then the work is submitted to the teacher. The teacher then selects a target number of and/or type of corrections to make. Keeping in mind that limited markings per page is best, the teacher determines what is reasonable and most useful for the student to focus on. This depends on the level of the student, the curriculum objectives, the expertise of the teacher, and where the greatest gap in practice or knowledge of the student lies. This style of correcting lends itself to helping individual students in different ways and with different items. A simple system can also be established for specific markings like circling a word for spelling or underlining a verb for tense problems. An easy to understand, and easy to mark for, system seems to work best. Below, this paper illustrates one system that employs this approach, which can be modified depending on the teacher and the teaching context.

After the student's work is returned, the teacher can follow up on how the corrections are interpreted, understood, and acted upon by using this information to select further corrections, design reinforcement lessons to correct common problems, and continue to monitor improvements and further concerns. There are many ways to organize corrections and to track trends and improvement. One way to do so is by

keeping a portfolio of written work and putting the corrections directly on the assignment within the text or at the bottom. Other options include keeping a grammar journal with the original sentence written with the original mistake underlined, and then the corrected sentence next to or under it. A space or a box can be included for the teacher to initial the correction. For more advanced classes, students can be asked to identify the types of mistakes they have made in the same journal or on the original paper. Other record-keeping devices could be within a student attendance card or sheet, or kept on index cards for study and review. Each teacher can develop and tailor an appropriate and user-friendly system based on their teaching context for this approach.

In practice, how does this approach of teacher-guided, targeted corrections, and more learner-autonomy and responsibility for the students play out in the classroom? Below is one example from an oral communication class with first-year students. Remember that while the approach is the same, teachers can create tailored systems that fit the students they have and the unique contexts they are in. Sometimes the modifications are even on a class-by-class basis.

An Example of the Approach in Action

This section describes a simple yet effective method for dealing with correction of written assignments in a lower-level oral communication class. It focuses on correction of only particular—targeted—items for better efficiency and efficacy, which reduces teacher workload while increasing learner responsibility. The system also provides data for tracking student progress as well as data for determining selection of review work or lesson materials for individuals or whole classes.

Definitions

Definition of Written Assignments

For this particular system, written assignments are defined as any outside of class homework that is submitted to teachers by students for correction and evaluation. These could be anything from paragraphs, essays and papers, to fill-in-the-blank worksheets with sentence level work. The system described is applicable to and effective for all, and generally at any level.

Definition of Targeted

In the system described below and for this overall approach, “targeted correction” refers to the process of selecting only certain items in a student’s or class’ written assignments to mark, and makes use of the difference between mistakes and errors.

Definition of Mistakes vs. Errors

A mistake is a random performance oversight for which the student possesses correct knowledge concerning the rule or standard usage to self-correct. On the other hand, an error is a performance deviation from standard usage or a rule of which the student is not aware.

Procedures

Pre-teaching

Prior to any assignments being given, students should be taught all the components of the correction system. These are: the difference between mistakes and errors; a system of marking corrections; a notation method students must use for resubmitting assignments with their attempts at correction; a teacher feedback system; a logging/tracking/evaluation system; and a possible proofreading component. In addition, it is important to emphasize, that when targeting is used, other mistakes/errors will be ignored.

Explanation of Mistakes vs. Errors

First, students must be made aware of the difference between a mistake and an error. Though usually new to them, this difference is generally not hard for them to grasp, especially when done by example on the board. A sentence with two or three of each type, mistakes and errors, is used. The total number of mistakes and errors is announced. Groups are asked to discuss and identify what needs to be corrected.

Example sentence, problem areas are shaded for a total of seven items:

Hers¹ old² sister have³ I⁴ dog and 11 car⁵ now. But⁶ she has not any husband⁷.

Students will generally be able to identify the problems in 1, 3, and 5, marking them as mistakes. Most (at the level of the class this was used in) will not be able to rectify 2, 4, 6 and 7, thus identifying them as errors in this class' knowledge base. This in turn gives the teacher, and even more importantly the students, an awareness of what they should work on and how their time should be spent.

Key:

- | | | |
|----------------|------------------------|---|
| 1) hers → her | 4) I → one | 7) has not any husband* → isn't married |
| 2) old → older | 5) cat → cats | (or) → doesn't have a husband |
| 3) have → has | 6) now. But → now, but | |

(*Note: Though British English still uses “have/has not...” it is becoming rather archaic and would generally not be used in this case.)

In addition, it must be explained and stressed at this time that mistakes are the work of the student to focus on and to correct, and that errors are the work of the instructor to correct and to explain. Also, the types of mistakes/errors can be discussed as part of the correction process, if student level allows for this (in the case of non-L1 speaking teachers), and if this kind of discussion does not detract from the goal of efficiency. For example, the teacher can explain that (3) is a simple agreement problem, (4) violates a formal rule, and (7) is a matter of usage.

Marking System

A very simple system using circles, underlining, parentheses, and lining through, is used to indicate items that need to be corrected. (Individual teachers can modify, expand or reduce this according to the general principles of the approach outlined in the introduction.) The teacher selects items to highlight using a variety of options depending on the desired purpose and outcome. A partial list is provided here:

- targeting the most serious errors
- targeting errors linked to a particular or the current lesson/topic
- targeting an individual student's weak points/areas

- targeting a whole class' weak points/areas
- targeting common errors of a particular linguistic group
- targeting lexical issues, such as usage, collocation, spelling, word form
- targeting individual grammar issues, such as tense, agreement, etc.
- targeting curriculum objectives
- targeting items/areas that will soon be tested
- targeting register

Marking System Key:

- circles → O = something is missing/needed (number and position can be used to give hints: OO /_o / ^o)
- underlining = the item is incorrect/not needed
- (parentheses) = the item is not incorrect, but there is a better option
- ~~lining through~~ = incomprehensible, try again

The above can be overlapped when necessary: (O example^O)

Example marked assignment with all issues addressed to provide sufficient examples for the reader to understand the system, i.e. no targeting used (markings usually in red pen).

Assignment: Interview three people about something they got angry about recently and report their stories in the spaces below. (Names changed for anonymity.)

1) Name: *Taro*

He was angly (about) his friends. One day the (circle) he belongO to had practice.

He participated O it₀ but his same class (circle) memberO didn't come. So he (became lonely).

2) Name: Keiko

She was angly (about) her sister. She (kept) O ice cream in (a) (refrigerator). But when she came (back) after (job) (there was no ice cream in a (refrigerator)). (After that), she asked her sister OO. She saved O "I have eaten it." So she is angry.

3) Name: Hanako

She was angly (about) her friends. Her friends came O her (room), and they ~~scattered there~~. So she was angly.

Notation Method for Resubmitting Marked Assignments

Students then number the marked items and make a list (see example below), indicating whether the marked item is a mistake, and then correct it, or whether it is an error, requiring teacher assistance. In some cases, students will also correct errors themselves by consulting a dictionary, classmate or other source. By doing any of these, learner responsibility is enhanced and teachers' workloads are reduced. (Again, all needed corrections have been indicated to provide the reader with a sufficient number of examples.)

Student Numbered and Self-corrected Example:

1) Name: Taro

He was angly¹ (about)² his friends. One day the (circle)³ he belong⁴ to had practice. He participated O⁵ it⁶ but his same class (circle)³ member⁷O⁸ didn't come. So⁹ he (became lonely)¹⁰.

#	<u>M/E</u> correction	<u>how corrected</u>
1)	M: <i>angly</i> → <i>angry</i>	<i>spelling mistake, I knew that</i>
2)	E: <i>about</i> → <i>at</i>	<i>asked a classmate</i>
3)	E: <i>circle</i> → <i>club</i>	<i>checked J/E dictionary</i>
4)	M: <i>belong</i> → <i>belongs</i>	<i>just mistake</i>
5)	E: <i>needs 'in' after participated</i>	<i>checked online dictionary</i>
6)	M: <i>needs comma</i>	<i>just I forgot</i>
7)	E: <i>I have no idea.</i>	
8)	E: <i>I have no idea.</i>	
9)	M: <i>So</i> → <i>So,</i>	<i>just mistake</i>
10)	M: <i>lonely</i> → <i>alone</i>	<i>just mistake</i>

Teacher's Review of Student's Corrections

The teacher then reviews the student's corrections of mistakes, checking to see if they are accurate or not, and also supplies corrections for any errors the student has made. In addition, explanations for errors can be provided at this point (on the assignment) or dealt with as class lessons or in individual feedback sessions. For a quick and easy way to track, tabulate, and indicate the student's success or failure at making corrections, a simple mark can be made for each one, in this case *maru* (a circle) and *batsu* (an X) are used. (Teacher's comments in non-italic.)

#	<u>M/E</u> correction	<u>how corrected</u>
O 1)	M: <i>angly</i> → <i>angry</i>	<i>spelling error</i>
O 2)	E: <i>about</i> → <i>at</i>	<i>asked a classmate</i>
O 3)	E: <i>circle</i> → <i>club</i>	<i>checked J/E dictionary</i>
O 4)	M: <i>belong</i> → <i>belongs</i>	<i>just mistake</i>
O 5)	E: <i>needs 'in' after participated</i>	<i>checked online dictionary</i>

- O 6) M: *needs comma* *just I forgot*
- X 7) E: *I have no idea.* → ‘member’ needs ‘s’ to agree with ‘friends’
- X 8) E: *I have no idea.* → but the other freshmen members
- X 9) M: *So* → *So,* → ...come, so he...*just mistake*
- X 10) M: *lonely* → *alone* *just mistake* → felt a little uncomfortable

Note that the student has accurately self-corrected six out of ten problems, three of them being errors, i.e. something she did not know previously, but investigated and discovered for herself. This is not an unusual ratio for self-correction, showing that proofreading is indicated, and should also be a component included in use of this approach. Also, one problem (10) was identified by the student as a mistake, but was actually an error. This is an example of how the system allows teachers to not only identify what a student’s mistakes and errors are, but also what false assumptions in the student’s knowledge base are.

Targeting

In the above examples, all items requiring correction were indicated to demonstrate the marking system. However, rather than marking all of these problematic areas in an assignment, as above, what this focused approach allows for and promotes is the targeting of only selected items for particular reasons, such as (repeated from above section on marking for convenience):

- targeting the most serious errors
- targeting errors linked to a particular or the current lesson/topic
- targeting an individual student’s weak points/areas
- targeting a whole class’ weak points/areas
- targeting common errors of a particular linguistic group

- targeting lexical issues, such as usage, collocation, spelling, word form
- targeting individual grammar issues, such as tense, agreement, etc.
- targeting curriculum objectives
- targeting items/areas that will soon be tested
- targeting register

In these ways, teachers can tailor the corrections to their own needs or the needs of particular students, classes, or even the curriculum. Below are some examples of targeting.

Example 1 of Targeted Items, Usage:

1) Name: *Taro*

He was angly (about) his friends. One day the (circle) he belong to had practice. He participated it but his same class (circle) member didn't come. So he (became lonely).

In this example, only incorrect use of lexical items is indicated, and other mistakes or errors are ignored. (Reminder: It is important to emphasize, when targeting, that other mistakes/errors will be ignored so that students do not assume that all other areas are correct.) Thus, only three items are identified, allowing the student to focus on only them, while at the same time, reducing the teacher's workload.

Example 2 of Targeted Items, Articles:

2) Name: *Keiko*

She was angly about her sister. She kept ice cream in a refrigerator. But when she

came back after job there was no ice cream in a refrigerator. After that, she asked her sister. She sayed "I have eaten it." So she is angry.

In this case, only the marking of incorrect article use is undertaken. Thus, the student will only have to spend time investigating why her use of 'a' is incorrect, and the teacher can focus on explanations concerning this, if the student reports it as an error. In addition, a worksheet or reference material on article use could be given to this student for further individual study, or if others in the class have the same trouble, a lesson on it can be conducted for all.

Example 3 of Targeted Items, Reported Speech:

2) Name: *Keiko*

She was angly about her sister. She kept ice cream in a refrigerator. But when she came back after job there was no ice cream in a refrigerator. After that, she asked her sister: She sayed "I have eaten it." So she is angry.

This time, besides the obvious spelling mistake and omission of the comma, which will probably be self-corrected by the student, reported speech is the targeted item here. As this is a common problem with ESL/EFL students, the rationale behind a targeted approach says that it is worthwhile to focus only on this item, and give concrete and thorough feedback on it.

Explaining Correction of Errors

Correction of errors can either be explained directly on the assignment, or in individual or whole-class sessions, depending on how individual or common the errors are. In addition, the teacher can gather support materials for review or create

whole lessons for large or small groups based on the data garnered from the corrections, using such to explain and reinforce corrections. The teacher has time available to do this because assignments are not marked for every insignificant mistake, and the responsibility for mistakes is shifted to the learner. Thus, the teacher has more time to prepare for focusing on error correction. Plus, students and/or whole classes benefit from this more individualized and tailored approach, making the system more efficient and effective. Everyone is working on personalized items because only a few important targeted corrections have been made.

Logging and Tracking Systems

Another benefit of this system is use of logging and tracking systems for mistakes and errors, which the students can use for study and the teacher for planning and evaluation. Various forms can be used, from simple recording of ratios of mistakes versus errors (M:E, in the example above 6:4) directly on written assignments, or with separate graphs or lists to show performance/progress, to a complete list of all mistakes and errors logged in a journal or on flash cards for study, or for use as a portfolio. Also, what is chosen for recording in such systems can be determined by the instructor or the students themselves, allowing for flexibility for the teacher or enhanced learner responsibility for students.

Proofreading

Proofreading, albeit after the fact and with teacher assistance, is more or less an enforced part of the overall system. By shifting the responsibility for correcting mistakes to the students and having them identify errors, they are in essence, proofreading their work after the fact. However, if desired, a proofreading

component can be added to the system beforehand by having students do so in class before handing in assignments, or by instituting a system of negative or positive motivation. For example, points can be deducted for the number of mistakes that aren't caught before submission.

Rewriting

As an additional step in the overall system, teachers can require rewriting of the assignments to reinforce use of the correct targeted forms. However, this is only recommended when all mistakes and errors are addressed so that students do not practice incorrect items.

Conclusion

After examining the approach illustrated in this paper, and the example correction system depicted above, there is much to consider in regard to this type of correction system. One might ask what is good about this approach for teachers? Or, is it good for the students? And, what does it accomplish? The answer to those questions lies in the title of this paper. It is a 'win-win' for all because it accomplishes the objective of providing effective and efficient correction for written assignments.

What specifically are these win-win components? One is the win-win concerning enhanced learner responsibility, which goes hand-in-hand with more individualized attention on every submitted assignment, which in turn leads to the creation of personalized grammar reference materials to review and study. By shifting more responsibility to the learners, they are forced to remedy their own mistakes and to 'notice' their errors. In addition, by having students understand the

difference between mistakes and errors, increased proofreading is enforced and proofreading skills are enhanced, empowering students and freeing up teachers to put more time and effort into true problem areas instead of a redundant review of simple mistakes—again, win-win. Another win-win is the flexibility the approach allows in regards to individualization of feedback and teaching at the student and class level. Teachers can choose which corrections are good for each student or each class, and students benefit from this tailored attention—win-win. The approach also provides predictability and a sound routine for how writing problems will be addressed, corrected, studied and reviewed, leading students to become more invested in assignments, since they know they will be working with them again, and allowing teachers to be more productive—win-win. And too, students will no longer dread getting back a paper full of red ink with incomprehensible and demoralizing, and thus useless, corrections. This should enhance motivation because students will take care of mistakes themselves, and in the process begin to eliminate them, and confounding errors will be dealt with in digestible chunks. As well, teachers will not have to spend time fruitlessly marking assignments, but will instead see their targeted and focused efforts making a real difference—perhaps the most important win-win.

Thus, the organization and rationalization of time and effort, of teaching and learning, and enhancement of shared responsibility supplied in this approach opens up an efficient and personalized two-way street of learning between teacher and student, which allows students to see how their own imperfect writing can be a powerful learning tool. How well they use it is up to them.