Raising Student Awareness about Grammatical and Lexical Errors via Email

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study conducted in a group of 16 students who were taking English Composition I at the University of Costa Rica. The results indicate that the systematic application of various strategies for correcting grammatical and lexical errors improves students' writing skills. The most frequently used strategies were writing the mistakes and their corrections in index cards, reading them aloud several times, or telling someone else about the mistakes and their corrections. The author concludes that using these strategies and raising students' awareness of their mistakes helped these students develop their writing skills in a more interesting, relaxed, and effective way.

Key words: grammatical errors, student awareness, English teaching, learning strategies, writing skills

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio realizado en un grupo de 16 estudiantes de composición inglesa en la Universidad de Costa Rica. Los resultados demuestran que el uso sistemático de algunas estrategias para corregir errores gramaticales y léxicos mejora las destrezas de escritura de los estudiantes. Las estrategias usadas con más frecuencia incluyen escribir los errores y sus correcciones en fichas, leerlos en voz alta muchas veces, o contarle a otra persona sobre esos errores y cómo se corrigieron. Se concluye que el uso de las estrategias y la ayuda por parte del profesor para concientizar a los estudiantes sobre el uso correcto de la lengua contribuyen para que el aprendizaje del inglés ocurra en un ambiente más relajado e interesante y a la vez para que este sea más efectivo.

Palabras claves: errores gramaticales, concientización, enseñanza del inglés, estrategias de aprendizaje, destrezas de escritura

Many English courses, at different levels, focus on developing writing skills, and when students are learning how to write in a foreign language, they always make mistakes. Sometimes, this situation can turn painful and frustrating. In order not to have the students suffer, teachers should find ways to alleviate this pain and help the students fulfill the course objectives in a faster and more enjoyable way. However, the teacher is not the only one who is responsible for this task; students play a prominent role in this process, and they should be committed to make their biggest effort to succeed. Reid (1993) clearly supports this idea when she mentions the assumptions that underlie the teaching of writing, and which I have adopted to guide the present study. She claims that "effective, appropriate writing is teachable and learnable, but teacher and student commitment, choice, and change are necessary for both" (p. viii). In addition, she believes that "the most successful ESL writing classroom occurs in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust in which teacher responsibility is balanced by student responsibility" (p. ix). Thus the current study was conducted in an atmosphere of respect, trust, and mainly responsibility from the students and the instructor.

A large number of writing teachers usually follow the same procedures in their lessons. In a traditional writing class, the instructor often presents a model piece of writing to the students, does some pre-writing activities, and engages the students in producing a text. This work is later evaluated by the instructor, who provides feedback in various ways by correcting the compositions. Once the students get their compositions back, the most challenging task for the instructor is to have the students analyze this feedback, and to make it a positive and useful learning experience. However, this is not a simple task. When I have taught composition courses, sometimes I have noticed that some students find rewriting their work boring, and they do it reluctantly just to fulfill a course requirement. Thus, the teacher should be creative and think about possibilities to tackle this boredom, so that students can achieve the course objectives. Furthermore, the instructor should raise the students' awareness about their mistakes. The expectation is that if the learners are aware of their mistakes, they will not make them again in future writing tasks. With this deep-rooted belief in mind, I decided to help a group of 16 second-year English majors to become aware of their grammatical and lexical errors by implementing a three-stage plan based on four key concepts: awareness, strategies, error correction, and feedback. The following section describes each of them as understood in the present study.

Awareness

Our minds are very powerful, so I firmly believe that if we help our students become aware of their mistakes, they will remember these errors and the feedback received. If they can recall feedback, they will avoid these faulty structures or wrong words in future compositions, and their writing will improve. This type of awareness is described as language awareness. In an attempt to define this

term, Carter (as cited in Andrews 2007) states that this "awareness involves at least … a greater self-consciousness about the forms of the language we use. We need to recognize that the relations between the forms and meanings of a language are sometimes arbitrary, but that language is a system and that it is for the most part systematically patterned" (p.12). Following Carter's claim, this study was guided by the belief that language awareness enhances learning. Another belief underlying this study is that to help learners become aware, they should experience learning themselves. This belief is clearly supported by Kohonen (1999) in the following assertion:

> experiential learning emphasizes that theoretical concepts become part of the individual's personal constructs only when they have been experienced meaningfully on a subjective, emotional level…Learning is internalized and transformed in the process of reflecting at deeper levels of understanding and interpretation, and using the meanings in active ways. Learning is thus a continuous, cyclic process that integrates immediate experience, reflection, and action. (p.16)

In the current study, this learning refers to writing, which is a process; the immediate experience is understood as the selective error correction; the reflection was done before writing the emails, and the action was the selection of the strategy and its use to recall the feedback written by the instructor. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to help learners live a novel classroom experience in which they can select the mistakes they would like to correct, choose a strategy that would remind them about the errors, and be more conscious of their grammatical and lexical weaknesses. This selective error correction is an innovation in this writing course because the students have always been requested to fully rewrite their assignments after receiving feedback. In this study, on the contrary, learners could not only choose the faulty forms that they considered important to correct but also submit their corrections electronically in a given period of time, usually a week. They also knew that they would receive teacher feedback almost immediately and in a more personalized way. In addition, emailing eased communication between the instructor and the students. In fact, at times receiving feedback resulted in a virtual conference because there were several exchanges with each learner. The purpose of doing this type of correction was to raise student awareness and to foster reflection on his/her written performance.

Strategies

Strategies, in general, have been defined by Brown (2000) as "specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information" (p.113). Strategies play a crucial role in the process of learning English; therefore, teachers should encourage students to use strategies. As Lai (2009)

has clearly stated, "language instructors can assist the language learning process by helping learners develop appropriate strategies" (p.255). Going one step forward into specificity, Oxford (1990) describes learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p.8). Research has proven that "successful learners effectively use a greater number, and a higher frequency, of learning strategies" (Bruen, 2001; Chamot et al., 1988; Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003, as cited in Lai 2009). In this study, the elements described in the definition given by Brown (200) are clearly present: the error correction strategies used by the students are the methods; the correction task constitutes the problem that the students have to approach, and the development of the students' writing skills is the particular end that the students are expected to reach. In addition, if using error correction strategies makes the learners experience pleasure and fun, they will acquire the grammatical structures faster and will be able to transfer this knowledge to new situations. Certainly, learners are more likely to internalize what they enjoy than what they dislike.

Error correction

In the process of learning English as a foreign language, making errors is something inevitable; nevertheless, mistakes constitute a source of learning if they are corrected appropriately. In this correction stage, the teacher is responsible for guiding the students so that they can find the best way to make the corrections. To do a good job, the teacher should clearly understand the different types of errors that most students usually make in order to explain them to the students and to anticipate problems. According to Thornbury (1999), errors can be classified into three different types taking into account lexicon, grammar, and discourse. Lexical errors are defined as mistakes at the word level, and they include, for example, choosing the wrong word for the meaning the students want to express (*I made my homework* instead of *I did my homework*). Grammar errors involve writing faulty structures which may include wrong verbal tenses, incorrect verbal forms, and syntax problems, among others. On the other hand, discourse errors are those "which relate to the way sentences are organized and linked in order to make whole texts" (p.114). Although discourse errors are considered important to tackle, they are not dealt with in this study. They constitute data for a further research. Thus, this study analyzes only lexical errors (choosing the wrong word, including prepositions) and grammatical errors.

The following section describes the error categories examined in this article and provides an example of each type of error taken from the students' compositions. Although errors in punctuation do not fit any of the categories mentioned by Thornbury (1999), they are included here since they interfere with comprehensibility of the texts produced by the students.

Subject-verb agreement: The verb does not agree with the subject:
>   Error: A computer give us access to important information.
>   Correction: A computer gives us access to important information.

Subject omission: The subject is missing in the sentence.
>   Error: She visited the doctor because had a terrible headache.
>   Correction: She visited the doctor because she had a terrible headache.

Word order: The order of the words in a sentence is not correct.
>   Error: Her closet always is nicely organized.
>   Correction: Her closet is always nicely organized.

Adjective / Adverb: An adjective form has been used instead of an adverb or vice versa.
>   Error: Fabio is carelessly.
>   Correction: Fabio is careless.
>   Error: My grandfather drives very careful.
>   Correction: My grandfather drives carefully.

Verb form: An incorrect form of the verb has been used.
>   Error: Have you ever imagine today's society without computers?
>   Correction: Have you ever imagined today's society without computers?

Verb tense: An incorrect verb tense has been used.
>   Error: She get pregnant when she was in high school.
>   Correction: She got pregnant when she was in high school.

Pronoun: The wrong pronoun has been used or the reference is not clear.
>   Error: When my grandparents got married, them did not have any money.
>   Correction: When my grandparents got married, they did not have any money.

Comparative: The comparative form is not correct; the student did not use a comparative form where it was required; the student used a comparative form where it was not required.
>   Error: My brother grew more stronger than my cousin.
>   Correction: My brother grew stronger than my cousin.

Demonstrative adjective: The wrong demonstrative adjective was used.
>   Error: These type of beliefs is very common.
>   Correction: This type of beliefs is very common.

Article: The student used the wrong article; the student did not use any article.
>   Error: Jessica likes to paint and play guitar.
>   Correction: Jessica likes to paint and play the guitar.

Possessive noun: The apostrophe + s ('s or s') was misplaced or omitted.
> Error: My two sister's dolls had been stolen.
> Correction: My two sisters' dolls had been stolen.

Parallelism: In a series of elements, these are not presented in a parallel form.
> Error: He enjoys reading, to swim, and visit his friends.
> Correction: He enjoys reading, swimming, and visiting his friends.

Preposition: The wrong preposition has been used.
> Error: Francisco used to sit in his desk.
> Correction: Francisco used to sit at his desk.

Punctuation: Punctuation marks are misplaced, misused, or omitted.
> Error: If you live with your parents your lunch will be ready when you get home.
> Correction: If you live with your parents, your lunch will be ready when you get home.
> Error: You have to go to the supermarket buy your food and prepare it yourself.
> Correction: You have to go to the supermarket, buy your food, and prepare it yourself.

Feedback

Many composition teachers assume that students will develop their writing skills just by reading the written feedback that instructors provide in each writing assignment. In fact, Hyland (2007) asserts that "many students see their teacher's feedback as crucial to their improvement as writers," and many students feel frustrated if no feedback is provided. This feedback may appear in a variety of forms, for example, comments, questions, minimal marking, or correction codes. The last two were used in this study because they constitute very useful tools. Minimal marking "follows research which suggests that indicating the location and perhaps type of error, rather than direct correction, is more effective in stimulating a student response" (Bates et al., and Ferris as cited in Hyland 2007, p.181). Correction codes make "correction neater and less threatening than masses of red ink and help students to find and identify their mistakes" (Hyland 2007, p.181). I strongly agree with this statement, and I would add that using a pencil instead of a pen has a soothing effect on learners. Thus, all the compositions used in this study were marked in pencil to make feedback less traumatic.

Having described the way marking should be done, it is worth mentioning here the effectiveness of feedback in second or foreign language acquisition. Feedback is closely related to error correction, which is sometimes deemed negative by learners. Abbs and Freebairn (as cited in Thornbury

1999) claim that "making mistakes is an important and positive part of learning a language. Only by experimenting with the language and receiving feedback can students begin to work out how the language works" (p.116). This assertion supports not only Carter's (2007) claim about awareness but also my belief that having the students experience error correction in a freer way raises their awareness, and as a consequence, error avoidance is maximized.

Since technology is now a common element in most classrooms because it helps to enhance learning and to speed communication, handwritten feedback is being replaced by electronic feedback, which "covers a range of often dissimilar approaches to the teaching of writing" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p.105). For the purpose of this study, the term electronic feedback refers only to emailing; this was the medium the participants used to submit their revised compositions and to receive comments from the instructor. Having the students use this channel of communication to obtain feedback on their performance brings several advantages to the process of revising texts written by the students. First, as stated by Kroll (2003), "writing teachers can use e-mail to contact their students, and their students can have easy access to their teachers to ask questions about their work and to receive feedback on drafts." A further advantage stated by Woodin (as cited in Kroll 2003) is that "e-mail functions as a bridge between the language classroom and the natural setting. There is the opportunity for contact with a variety of native speakers, but from within the safety of one's own environment" (295). I believe that this feeling of security encourages slow, shy students, who do not dare ask questions in class, to send email messages to the professor asking for clarification of difficult structures or teaching points. In addition to these benefits, Hyland (2007) describes other strengths of electronic feedback:

> Teachers can provide comments on electronic submissions by email or by using the comment function, which allows feedback to be displayed in a separate window while reading a word processed text. Feedback on errors can also be linked to online explanations of grammar or to concordance lines from authentic texts to show students examples of features they may have problems using correctly. (p.183)

Additionally, Ferris (as cited in Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998) claims that "teacher feedback given on the computer, whether via floppy disk or e-mail, has the same visual advantages as handwritten commentary, with the added benefit that the teacher's handwriting will not interfere with students' mental processing of the written passage" (p.138). Since emailing feedback to students has proven to have many advantages, I chose this medium as the main channel of communication in this study, which intended to achieve three main objectives: to raise the students' awareness about their grammar and lexical mistakes, to encourage the students to avoid making the same mistakes, and to assist the students most effectively in their writing.

Research questions

The current study seeks to address the following three research questions:

1. Given a list of six strategies used to correct grammatical errors, which ones do the students prefer?
2. Does raising students' awareness about their grammatical and lexical errors help them improve their writing skills?
3. What are the students' attitudes toward using error correction strategies and emailing their errors and their corrections to their instructor for feedback?

Method

Subjects

The participants were 16 students who were taking LM-1235 English Composition 1 at the School of Modern Languages. This was their first academic writing course in their BA in English or BA in English Teaching. The aim of this course is to help students to write coherent and cohesive paragraphs about various topics using three rhetorical modes: comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and definition.

Procedure

During the first class session of the semester, the instructor asked the students about the strategies they frequently used to correct their mistakes after they had received teacher feedback. Most of the students stated that they did not use any strategies, and some of them even looked surprised when they heard that it was advisable to use strategies to learn new language structures and vocabulary. Therefore, I decided to start a plan right there and take some action to help these learners. The first stage of this plan dealt with familiarizing the learners with the following six strategies that they could use to correct their errors:

1. using index cards with their errors and the corresponding corrections (The students write the mistake on the card and then correct it by writing a grammatical and meaningful sentence. They read the sentence several times a week.)
2. having multiple encounters with their errors and their corrections in writing (The students write the corrected version of the faulty sentence seven times wherever they want.)

3. using mnemonic devices to remember their mistakes (The students use a learning aid such as a drawing, a sketch, or anything that will help them remember the mistake they made.)
4. constantly recalling the corrections (a mind memory) (The students keep remembering the mistake they made, and they repeat it mentally as many times as they like.)
5. reading the corrections aloud several times (The students read the corrected version of the faulty sentence aloud several times.)
6. telling someone else about their mistakes (The students tell a classmate or a friend about the mistake they made.)

I made sure all the students had understood each strategy and reminded them that they could choose the strategy that they liked best and made them promise they would use it to improve their writing skills. In the two following class sessions, I asked the students to write down the error correction strategies discussed in the previous lesson. The objective of this activity was to help students become familiar with the terminology. In the second stage of the plan, I had the learners revise faulty sentences taken directly from their compositions. For every assignment, I chose 15 sentences which contained serious grammatical or lexical errors, and after concealing the authors' identities, presented them to the class for analysis and revision. The third stage began as soon as I handed back the first marked composition in which I had provided correction symbols that all the students were familiar with. I asked the students to go over the feedback, to choose the errors that they wanted to correct, and to send me an email before the following class. In this email, they had to describe not only the error correction strategy they had applied that week but also the mistakes that they had selected and their corrections. In addition, I encouraged students to bring up any questions they had, and I promised them a prompt answer. To build student confidence, I always thanked them for their emails, praised their work, and answered all their questions. Furthermore, at times I posed some questions to them to promote real communication in writing. Although highly recommended, this emailing activity was voluntary.

In order to gather the data for this study, I analyzed 80 writing assignments written by the students. Their errors were classified into the 15 categories presented in Table 3. The overall number of mistakes was recorded, and the students were kept informed about their progress. The categories in which students made the most mistakes received special attention in a feedback session. Later, the students chose the errors they wanted to work on and wrote the instructor an email with the corrections. In addition, I had all of participants fill out a questionnaire at the end of the course in order to collect their opinions about this error correction plan. (See Appendix)

Results and Discussion

Before writing their first composition, the students were asked whether they would be willing to use some of those strategies and to justify their answers. Table 1 summarizes their responses. The number of answers reported by the students is shown in parentheses.

Table 1
The opinions of the students about using
the strategies at the beginning of the course

1. Using these strategies is hard because it is time-consuming, but maybe it is helpful.

2. Using these strategies is boring but helpful. (2)

3. Using these strategies will be difficult at the beginning because we are not used to them, but they will help me.

4. I think that using these strategies will help me improve my writing skills; however, some of them are a waste of time like using index cards, but the ones that do not require too much time are helpful and easy to use.

5. Using these strategies will help me become a better writer.

6. I think that using these strategies is necessary, but sometimes it will be hard to use them because I'm a busy person. I'll do my best. (2)

7. Using these strategies is very useful because they help us realize what mistakes we are making.

8. Using these strategies is very helpful in our learning process because we can spend more time thinking about our mistakes and we can learn from them.

9. These strategies will help us to understand the material we discuss in class and to improve our performance because we will have more practice on grammar. (2)

10. These strategies will be useful because in the past, we did not use any of them. I always made a lot of mistakes but never thought about them. I think I'm going to give these strategies a try. (2)

11. Using these strategies will improve my grammar accuracy, and this will make my writing more coherent.

12. Using these strategies is very useful because sometimes I don't look at my own mistakes seriously, and very often I forget my corrections too.

As can be seen in the previous comments, the attitude of some students at the beginning of the course was not positive at all; they described the error correction strategies using terms such as time-consuming, boring, difficult to use, and a waste of time. Only a few learners thought the strategies would help them improve their writing and described them as useful tools in the learning process.

Table 2 reports the most frequently used strategies by the students during the study. The figures indicate the number of times the students reported having used the strategy.

Table 2
The strategies most frequently used as reported by the students

Strategies Used by the Students	Frequency of use
Using index cards with their errors and the corresponding corrections	38
Having multiple encounters with their errors and their corrections in writing	35
Reading the corrections aloud several times	29
Telling someone else about their mistakes	15
Constantly recalling the corrections (a mind memory)	7
Using mnemonic devices to remember their mistakes	3

As reported by the participants, the two strategies that they applied the most were using index cards to write their mistakes and the corrections and having multiple encounters with the errors and the corrections. This probably means that the students wrote the corrections and read them constantly. As a matter of fact, the students used these strategies 73 times. On the other hand, the students reported that they rarely recalled the corrections (kept them in mind) or used mnemonic devices as error correction strategies; the total number of times they were used was only 10.

Table 3 presents the number of errors found in each category in the five writing assignments.

Table 3
Error categories and the overall number of mistakes in each composition

Type of error	Comp 1	Comp 2	Comp 3	Comp 4	Comp 5
Punctuation	39	26	19	21	11
Preposition	15	14	11	28	10
Article	14	8	11	10	5
Verb form	12	5	18	10	3
Pronoun	9	8	5	7	2
Word order	7	4	11	5	2
Verb tense	7	5	7	6	2
S-V agreement	5	7	3	1	1
Subject omission	16	9	2	1	0
Adverb - Adjective	2	0	0	1	0
Adjective - Adverb	2	0	0	0	0
Comparatives	2	1	0	0	0
Demonstrative	2	3	1	2	0
Possessive noun	2	2	2	3	0
Parallelism	11	7	0	0	0

The results in this table indicate that the two most frequent types of errors that the students made were using wrong punctuation marks or omitting them and choosing the wrong preposition. An interesting fact here is that these two areas do not deal with grammatical aspects of the language. Errors in prepositions result from wrong word choice, and punctuation deals with mechanics and sometimes with meaning; for example, when students write fragments, it is very likely that the meaning of the structure is unclear, so in their attempt to write a grammatical sentence, they write a fragment. In addition, these figures show that the students made a large number of mistakes in punctuation at the beginning of the course (39), but they improved a little in the second and third writing tasks (26 and 19 errors); however in the fourth composition, there was an increase of errors (21). It seems that punctuation errors are extremely hard because the students were not able to avoid them; they still made 11 mistakes in this area in the last composition.

Regarding errors in prepositions, the behavior of the students was a little different. There were 15 and 14 errors in the first two compositions respectively, a slight decrease in the third task (11), but in the fourth composition, the students made 28 mistakes. In the last task, they still made 10 errors in this area. A possible explanation for these results might be that the students had difficulty with the vocabulary they needed to develop a cause-and-effect topic, or that they did not have enough background information about that topic assigned for the fourth composition. Another factor that might have affected the students' writing negatively was the fact that this task was carried out in class and the time allotted was very limited. Obviously, these results indicate that the students needed more practice on prepositions or perhaps more work on collocations which include prepositions. However, these results should not be considered surprising because prepositions are difficult to use correctly. This claim is confirmed by Hasbún (2007) in a study conducted with 159 college students. She concludes that "the use of prepositions is one of the main problems in mastering English." To solve this problem, she suggests that "instead of teaching prepositions as isolated words they must be considered integral parts of larger discourse" (p.127). Moreover, Chodorow, Tetreault & Han (2008) assert that "preposition usage is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for non-native speakers to master. Preposition errors account for a significant proportion of all ESL grammar errors."

Definitely, the aspects in which the students' improvement was significant were parallelism (from 11 to 0 errors), the use of articles (from 14 to 5 errors), verb forms (from 12 to 3), and subject omission (from 16 to 3 errors). Even more noticeable is the fact that in the last composition, the students did not make any mistakes in the use of comparative forms, demonstratives, possessive nouns, adverbs, adjectives, or in parallel forms. These areas seemed less problematic for the students, and they were able to avoid every possible mistake. During the course, the concept of parallelism was explained in detail, and the students did four exercises to practice it. I noticed that the students looked motivated and eager to do the exercises. This attitude might have contributed to their excellent performance in these last areas where no mistakes were found.

The performance of the students in the last composition was much better than in the first one, as the results in Table 4 indicate.

Table 4
Grades obtained by the students on the first and last compositions
and their overall improvement

Student	Composition 1	Composition 5	Increase
1	7.60	9.50	1.90
2	9.00	9.40	0.40
3	8.00	8.50	0.50
4	6.30	6.10	- 0.20
5	5.00	6.90	1.90
6	9.10	9.60	0.50
7	8.20	8.90	0.70
8	7.60	8.70	1.10
9	8.40	9.50	1.10
10	7.90	9.20	1.30
11	8.00	9.80	1,80
12	6.00	7.10	1.10
13	8.10	8.70	0.60
14	8.20	9.10	0.90
15	6.20	7.30	1.10
16	8.00	8.70	0.70
	= 7.60	= 8.56	= 0.96

The results in Table 4 clearly show that all the students, except one, improved their writing performance during the course. The students who improved the most showed an increase of 1.90 in their grades. One of them was the weakest student in the class. He got the lowest grade on the first composition. Quite interestingly, the students who wrote the best at the beginning of the course did not show much improvement, only 0.40. Unfortunately, one student did not seem to benefit from this intervention since he did not make any improvement; on the contrary, he got a lower grade on the last writing task. However, after checking my class records, I realized that he had emailed his revised versions only once. When asked why he had not done it, he replied that he had been very busy at work. His poor performance cannot be attributed to the use of an ineffectual strategy but to lack of use or even commitment.

Table 5 summarizes the comments that the students made which show that they were more aware of their errors at the end of the course.

Table 5
Students' comments that show awareness about
the use of correct language forms

"I think I made this mistake [subject omission] because I did not pay attention, so I will be more careful next time."

"Now I know that when I explain something, I remember it and I prove myself that I understood it. So I will tell my sisters about my mistakes and how I corrected them. This way they will learn something too."

"I plan to carry these cards in my backpack, so I can check them easily before writing a composition. I'll make sure that I won't make the same mistakes."

"After reading my teacher's feedback, I realized that I won't make some of those mistakes if I am more careful. I need to check my compositions several times before I print them. For other mistakes, I will use the strategies to remember my errors and avoid them."

"I noticed that I chose the wrong word on many occasions. A good way to avoid this problem is to pay attention to what I usually read in order to increase my vocabulary and make the right choice then."

"I noticed that I chose the wrong word on many occasions. A good way to avoid this problem is to pay attention to what I usually read in order to increase my vocabulary and make the right choice then."

"I wrote all the mistakes and their corrections in cards, and I've found this is a very useful technique because it allows me to keep track of my mistakes so that I don't repeat them."

A semantic differential scale was used to determine the student attitude toward the use of error correction strategies at the beginning and at the end of the course. Figure 1 illustrates these results.

Figure 1
Comparison of student attitude toward using error correction
strategies at the beginning and at the end of the course
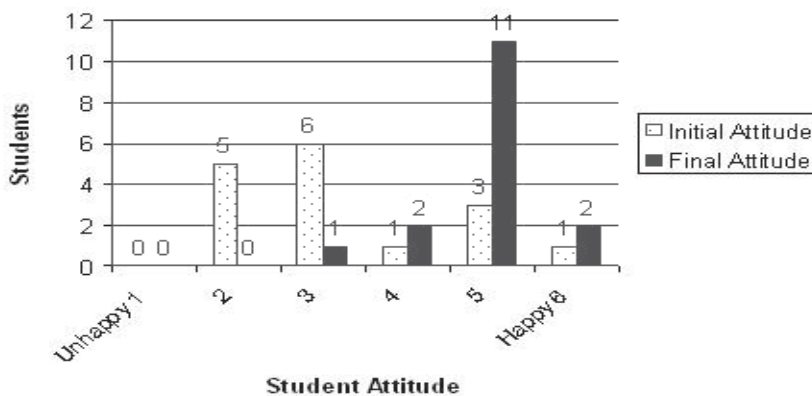
Most of the students (11) reported that they were not very happy about the use of these correction strategies when the course started, and they indicated this negative attitude by choosing numbers 2 and 3 in the above scale. Only four students selected numbers 5 and 6 in the semantic differential continuum, indicating that they felt happy, or at least comfortable, using the strategies. On the contrary, 15 students reported that they felt happy about the use of the strategies at the end of the course; only one student chose number 3. His choice indicates that his attitude tended to be the negative rather than positive.

Additionally to their attitude, the students were asked to express their opinions about the use of electronic feedback. Their comments are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6
The opinions of the students about emailing
their corrections to the instructor

Sending emails to the instructor…

- is a good idea because it tells her how the students are correcting their mistakes and what areas need improvement.

- helps students become aware of their weak areas.

- is a lot of fun because we can select our mistakes and correct them on the computer.

- provides extra practice because the instructor writes back to us.

- is like having a professor for much more time. You can think about your mistakes patiently and get extra feedback on problematic areas.

- is easier and faster than having a conference with the teacher; all the information can be saved in a file for later use.

- is very nice because we get individual attention from the professor at any time.

- is very good because it made me think about the causes for my mistakes. Trying to explain my mistakes helped me learn the correct structures.

- allows us to express our feelings about making mistakes, and the teacher always makes encouraging remarks

- is faster and easier that writing another version of the composition, and I can read my corrections as many times as I want.

- is a different way of "forcing" us to find our mistakes and to correct them fast.

- is a different way of "forcing" us to find our mistakes and to correct them fast.

- is not a good idea because I often have a hard time finding a computer with an Internet connection.

As can be seen in Table 6, all the participants, except one, were very satisfied with the use of email to correct their mistakes. They found it very helpful, motivating, and even fun. Furthermore, they reported that emailing provided

them with extra practice of the language because they could exchange information with the instructor. I would dare say that they were willing to hear my reassuring words when they read my feedback and probably did not feel so bad about making mistakes in their compositions.

In summary, 93.7% of the learners had a positive attitude toward this error correction plan. The students became aware of their mistakes mostly in punctuation, parallelism, word choice, verb forms, verb tenses, and word order. The data show that not only did the students develop their writing skills, but also they enjoyed this type of error correction. Some of them believe that the plan was successful because emailing the instructor was easier and faster than having a conference with her. They also claimed that the selective correction of errors reduced the amount of stress in the process, and that emailing the instructor meant some extra practice in using the language. Another advantage stated by the participants was the fact that those emails containing valuable teacher feedback could be saved on the computer for later use. When asked if they would recommend this plan to other language learners, 100% of the students said that they would because this experience had raised their awareness about areas that needed improvement while enhancing their learning in a stress-free atmosphere.

Limitation of the study

The small number of participants in this study constitutes the main limitation. This rather small sample allows only generalizations in this group of students, and no definite conclusions in a larger scale can be drawn from these results. However, this study provides some ideas for further research. For example, it would be interesting to analyze individual cases to determine those areas in which each student improved the most. In addition, the study could be replicated with a larger sample to determine its reliability.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study supports the following conclusions:

1. In a composition class, it is very important to let your students identify the sort of errors that they constantly make and to anonymously share these faulty structures with their classmates. This whole class sharing raises awareness of their mistakes.
2. Using some strategies such as index cards to write mistakes and their corrections helps students improve their writing if this activity is done consistently.
3. Composition teachers should help their students understand that learners can become excellent writers; however, this process requires a great deal of commitment not only from the students but also from the instructor.

Both parts have to make a great effort to enhance learning. The students should systematically correct their grammatical and lexical errors, and the instructor should provide appropriate and reassuring feedback.

4. As responsible writing teachers, we should always look for different procedures and ideas to help our learners write correctly, and in this study, exchanging email messages to ask for and receive feedback has proven to be really effective.

5. Electronic feedback can change student attitude toward revising compositions, build student confidence and increase motivation. These three benefits have proven significant in this group of composition learners.

6. Exchanging emails with the students to give them feedback became a useful mechanism to communicate with the students. The students felt that they had easy access to the instructor and that she was listening to them all the time. This thought is shared by Wlodkowsky (as cited in Dörnyei 2001), "*Listening* to a person is the single most powerful transaction that occurs between ourselves and another person that tells that individual that we accept him as a human being … the way we listen tells learners more than anything else how much consideration we are really giving them" (p. 37). Thus, *listening* to the students via email turned out to be a humanistic approach that contributed to raise the students' awareness about their grammatical and lexical errors and helped them write more effectively in English.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

Using Strategies for Error Correction in LM-1235 Composition I
Please complete the following questionnaire.

Name: _____

1. From the following strategies for error correction, check (√) the ones that you used to correct some of your mistakes in your compositions.

    _____ Using index cards to write the errors and their correction
    _____ Multiple encounters (looking at the mistake / correction several times)
    _____ Mnemonic devices (using something to remind you of the mistake)
    _____A mind memory (remembering the corrections several times)
    _____Reading the corrections aloud
    _____Telling somebody about the mistakes I made

2. Which strategies were the most helpful? Why?
_____

3. Which strategies wouldn't you use? Why?
_____

4. How did you feel about using these strategies at the beginning of the course? Circle the number that best represents your feelings.

    Negative _____Positive
              1   2   3   4   5   6

5. How do you feel about using these strategies now? Circle the number that best represents your feelings.

    Negative _____Positive
              1   2   3   4   5   6

6. In a scale from 1 to 10, how much did you learn by using these strategies?_____

7. In terms of grammatical aspects, what did you learn by using these strate-
    gies? _____

8. Would you recommend using these strategies to other language learners?
        Yes _____ No _____ I'm not sure.

9. What do you think about using emails with your corrections to your instruc-
    tor? _____

10. Did emailing your instructor help you correct your mistakes or not?
    Explain._____