

Ferris, D. (2002). *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing*.
Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing provides numerous suggestions for current and future second language (L2) teachers about how to treat student error to improve the accuracy of their writing. It provides both theoretical background and a practical guide for error treatment in L2 writing. Although this book is written mainly for current and future L2 writing instructors, it also can be addressed to scholars in the field of L2 writing and teacher educators.

The main argument of this volume conveys the author's strong belief that the incorporation of teacher feedback with student's self-editing truly improves student writing. In the introduction, she claims that treatment of student-written error encompasses "not only teacher feedback and grammar instruction but also consciousness raising, strategy training, and student accountability" (p. 1). The ultimate goal of this volume is to provide "information not only about how to teach students but about what teachers need to know to adequately treat written error" (p. 1). That is, this volume does not simply provide a list of do's and don'ts to L2 teachers, but rather it offers fundamental knowledge so that L2 teachers can make their own decisions.

This book consists of five chapters and a substantial set of appendices. The body is divided in two main parts: an up-to-date overview of the

literature on error treatment and its practical application to L2 writing instructions. The first part includes two chapters (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2), which provide a brief overview of theoretical issues and research findings on the effects of L2 error treatment. The second part, the next three chapters, provides pedagogical suggestions, discussing the knowledge necessary for error analysis, strategies for error analysis and feedback, and strategies for students to develop their self-editing skills. This volume is well-organized and connects theory and practice, which makes this book persuasive and consistent.

There is one previous book review of this volume by John Bunting (2004). His comments are mostly positive. He commented that "this text is an essential tool for any teacher who subscribes to the belief that L2 writing students benefit from error correction and that the implementation of such error correction needs to be systematic ... and workable within the constraints of the L2 writing classroom" (p. 143). He, on the whole, admired the content and organization of the whole volume, especially regarding Chapter 4 as wonderful, although he directed a minor criticism to Chapter 2.

The first chapter, "Why is error treatment necessary for L2 writing?" briefly discusses theoretical issues on error correction. The author reviews how theorists' and teachers' views of the importance of grammar accuracy have shifted over the past decades. Mainly discussing the shift of scholars' attention from the process-approach to grammar accuracy in L2 writing, she

focuses our attention to accuracy over fluency in L2 student writing. Also, she discusses objections to error correction in L2 writing classes, which were initially made by John Truscott in his 1996 article titled, "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing," published in *Language Learning*. Truscott (1996) and some other researchers point out that there is little evidence that grammar correction and error feedback improve students' accuracy over the long term. In responding to this argument, the author states that "long-term development is unlikely without observable short-term improvement, at least in the ability to attend to and correct errors when pointed out by teachers" (p. 8).

The second chapter, "Perspectives on error correction in L2 writing," further looks at the debate over the effects of error treatment, such as teacher feedback for students' errors and other types of classroom intervention, as well as students' perceptions about error treatment. Ferris devotes the entire chapter to analyzing and evaluating various research findings available on the topic of error treatment for L2 writing. She concludes this chapter with a considerable number of research questions left unsolved in the previous literature, which might attract L2 writing scholars to further exploration.

Most importantly, from the findings discussed in Chapter 2, Ferris draws several main assumptions that leads to the pedagogical suggestions provided in the remaining chapters. Bunting (2004) said that "this chapter is

perhaps the least engaging for teachers who, already convinced that error correction is a valid pedagogical tool, are looking for ways to provide it effectively to their students" (p. 143). By examining as many studies available on the topic of error treatment as possible within a limited space, she fails to account for the backgrounds of subjects studied or methods used in each study in detail, which makes it difficult to judge the research evidence or see what kind of feedback has an effect on different types of students. This chapter does, however, provide important theoretical background information for teachers to bridge with practice.

The third chapter, "Preparing L2 writing teachers to treat student error," provides four principles of preparation for error treatment, which state that ESL teachers need to study aspects of grammar particularly problematic for ESL students, practice error analysis, develop in-class grammar instructions, and understand theoretical issues in SLA and L2 composition. Since this chapter enumerates specific error types common in ESL student writing and grammar aspects problematic to non-native speakers (e.g., verb tense and aspect combinations, active and passive voice constructions, the basic verb types etc.), it is especially helpful for novice native English-speaking ESL teachers. Sample error-analysis exercises provided in this chapter are also useful for ESL teachers to develop their error-analysis skills and for teacher educators to train prospective ESL teachers in error analysis.

The fourth chapter, "Responding to student errors: Issues and strategies," discusses questions of which error to mark, when to correct errors, how to provide feedback, and how to help students use error correction. In providing strategies and techniques, the author suggests numerous options for teachers, such as comprehensive versus selective error correction, direct versus indirect feedback, error location versus error identification, textual corrections versus end notes, and so forth. In so doing, the author presents many samples of student writing and teachers' error markings within the chapter and an appendix.

Although the author suggests preferable options for some specific instances (e.g., direct feedback for untreatable errors), she does not offer "a simple list of dos and don'ts that will work well for all students" (p. 76). As the author states, "it is impossible and inappropriate to apply the same feedback strategies to all student populations and all situations" (p. 76). Also, this chapter significantly reminds teachers of the importance of perceiving error feedback as "part of a larger strategy of building students' knowledge and strategy bases, not simply a 'fix-it' list for a particular paper," which is related to the concept of the following chapter (p. 72).

The last chapter, "Beyond error correction: Teaching grammar and self-editing strategies to L2 student writers," examines other important pedagogical issues on error treatment, mainly of students' awareness about the importance of editing, self-editing strategies, supplementary in-class

grammar instruction, and peer- and self-editing workshops. The author claims that “all four of these concerns, used in combination with thoughtful and consistent teacher feedback strategies, may help students to edit individual papers more effectively and to improve in accuracy over time” (p. 77). Therefore, this chapter, along with the previous chapter, gives us powerful pedagogical suggestions and tools that L2 writing teachers can employ or adapt for their own contexts. Ferris claims a strong connection between content and form. That is, “a lack of accurate forms can obscure ideas” (p. 79). By claiming thus, the author suggests that not only teachers but also students need to be aware of the importance of error correction in their own writing. While Chapter 4 discusses error-feedback strategies and techniques for teachers, this chapter presents self-editing strategies for students. Error treatment will not be effective unless students understand the need for accuracy and editing and pay attention to teacher feedback. In this chapter, Ferris encourages teachers to incorporate conferences and mini-lessons in their writing classrooms in order to observe “different needs,” “individual learning styles,” and students’ progresses. (p. 105).

This volume achieves its objectives. Ferris successfully creates cohesion among chapters and makes a strong argument. Throughout the last three chapters, she encourages teachers to prepare themselves to treat student error (Chapter 3) and carry out a systematic and comprehensive error-treatment plan (Chapter 4 and 5). At the end of this volume, she

offers a sample error-treatment process chart to show how all the error treatment elements discussed in this volume can work together, which is appropriate to close her volume.

The reader should be aware of several issues. This volume is written especially for teachers in ESL contexts rather than EFL contexts. Bunting (2004) said in his book review that “this accessible text will be useful for almost all L2 writing classrooms” (p. 143). I would say, however, that EFL teachers working in homogeneous classrooms may not benefit as much as ESL teachers will from some of the sections. Most of the suggestions offered in this volume target ESL, particularly native English-speaking, teachers of multi-lingual classrooms, focusing on the distinction between native and non-native speakers. Also, this book may not be valuable for teachers who advocate the process-writing approach or who treat highly advanced learners. Also, Ferris does not define ESL students in a detailed way, which makes it difficult to judge the true effects of error treatment.

Nevertheless, I would recommend this book to most L2 writing teachers. This is a highly valuable volume in that it could address both scholars’ and teachers’ attention to the importance of accuracy and error correction. It provides numerous choices and specific samples of student writing, teacher’s error marking, and other kinds of exercises, which are useful for both novice and experienced teachers to use or to adapt in their on-going or prospective classrooms. There is no error feedback that works

best for your students. Rather, you should assimilate the knowledge necessary for error treatment and examine how you can adapt it in your own contexts. This volume offers a good starting point for further exploration.

Reference

- Bunting, J. (2004). [Review of the book *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing*]. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88 (1), 142-144.