Consideration on Error Correction for Teaching Writing in EFL Class

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For both communication and academic needs, the demand on teaching/learning writing in English is increasing in Korea as an EFL situation. In teaching/learning L2 writing, error correction should be one of the biggest considerations. On grammar correction in teaching L2 writing, there are pros and cons among researchers such as Truscott (1996), Ferris (1999) and many others. However, in teaching/learning writing in Korea, error correction is much needed with the following reasons. First of all, students whose writing were corrected show more improvement in their writing than the others whose errors are not corrected. Second, error correction as a form of feedback helps L2 students not to give up their endeavor in learning writing and makes them continue to write. In other words, giving feedback on their written errors seems to get better results. For successful error correction in teaching/learning L2 writing, having writing teachers well-trained and prioritizing of teachers in teaching L2 writing will be the answer to the practical problems. Also, co-teaching with well-prepared native writing teachers will be another alternative since we already have many native teachers in our English education field. Lastly strengthening selection criteria of hiring new English teachers, focusing on their teaching ability of L2 writing, will be another answer.

I. IS WRITING IN ENGLISH IMPORTANT IN EFL SITUATIONS?

In EFL situations, especially in Korea, writing in English has been marginalized compared to the other language functions such as reading, speaking, and listening in English. While the nature of writing itself needs higher English proficiency than the other functions above-mentioned, the
absence of appropriate training for teachers and necessity of that level of proficiency could be reasons. Also, writing in English has not been taught much in Korea because writing English as a foreign language has been considered just as a form of language practice (Ferris, 1995).

However, more and more, higher level of English proficiency is needed because of the necessities of more frequent communication privately and officially in both written and spoken forms in English. Especially, in EFL situations, communication in English will be more likely to happen through not speaking in person but writing. Curriculum Development Council (1999) wrote that "writing is an important skill because in real life people often have to communicate with each other in writing... Writing is also important in that it helps learners learn. It reinforces the language structures and vocabulary that learners acquire" (as cited in Lee, 2004).

Another practical reason that writing in English is important is that more and more universities in Korea are aggressively promoting the English use on their campuses and encouraging students to study abroad (Brender, 2005). Many of the students go to the English spoken countries where they need to cope with writing in English as a real situation not as a practice. Also, many universities in Korea have been hiring faculty members who got their advanced degrees in English–spoken countries, mostly in the United States. This trend will be expanded because the universities are struggling to attract more foreign students in order to compensate the shortage of Korean students caused by the sharply reduced birth rate in Korea with them. Universities are trying to increase the number of classes taught in English which require higher English proficiency level not only listening comprehension but also writing in English.

Considering that writing is a thing not built in a day but required a lot of time and endeavor, teaching/learning writing in English demands to take an urgent action like as reading, speaking and listening even in EFL situations.

II. WHY IS ERROR CORRECTION NEEDED IN EFL SITUATIONS?

In EFL situations, learning English is very difficult because there is little chance to be exposed to that language without intentional efforts. Also, unlike L1
or ESL situations, acquiring English language in EFL situations usually begins with learning all the four language skills such as reading, speaking, listening and writing at the same time, even though the level of importance placed on each of them could be a little bit different. Learning/teaching English language in EFL situations, especially in Korea, in essence is thought of as making errors and having them corrected continuously aligning with grammar teaching and learning.

Truscott (1996) advocates that grammar correction in L2 writing does not work at all, and that it is not only ineffective but also harmful, while Frodesen and Holten pointed that "he suggests nothing to put in its place" (2003, p. 147). Ferris and Roberts (2001) present that error-corrected students had shown improvement statistically on their writings over time based on research. Considering that EFL students learn English writing through the procedures of making errors and having them corrected in their writing, and that many of them start learning writing in English as adult learners who may already be fossilized and not make any advancement in accuracy linguistically (Ferris, 2004), error corrections in EFL contexts seem to be needed. In her study (2004), Ferris makes it clear that "Students who receive feedback on their written errors will be more likely to self-correct them during revision than those who receive no feedback – and this demonstrated uptake may be a necessary step in developing longer term linguistic competence. Students are likely to attend to and appreciate feedback on their errors, and this may motivate them both to make corrections and to work harder on improving their writing" (p. 56). Chandler (2003) got the results that the "correctness of English of student writing over 10 weeks improved significantly more if these high intermediate East Asian college students were required to correct their errors than if they were not... Moreover, this increase in accuracy by the experimental group was not accompanied by a decline in fluency over the semester" (p.279).

Another reason of necessity of error correction is that students desperately want their teachers to correct errors in their writing. In Leki’s study (1991), L2 students want error feedback and believe that they benefit from it (as cited in Lee, 2004). Unlike L1 students, students in EFL contexts may not even notice their errors in their writing without explicit pointing out. In EFL situations, how could students know and correct errors in their
writing without the help of error correction from their teachers or any other sources? They will not even know if they have errors in their writing without their errors being pointed out and corrected. Also, students in EFL contexts write in English in order to get good grades in a test such as TOEFL which usually require error-free writings for good results. Most of the students will be frustrated and may give up writing in English if they do not receive appropriate feedback on their written errors from their teachers.

III. WHAT FACTORS NEED TO BE CONSIDERED IN ADVANCE FOR SUCCESSFUL ERROR CORRECTION IN KOREA AS AN EFL CONTEXT?

In Korea as an EFL situation, writing in English can be the most difficult part to learn and teach English. To write well in English takes more integrated competence. However, EFL students should learn writing in English along with reading, listening and speaking almost at the same time. Also, writing includes more complicate factors such as contents, form, styles, and the others. What makes learning and teaching writing in English more difficult in EFL situations; there are few competent instructors to teach how to write well in English. "The blind can not lead the blind." Like as Truscott pointed in his writing (1996), whatever reasons teachers have, in many cases they could not help students properly and if the teachers are not native speakers, additional problems could arise. Ferris also agreed that "poorly done error correction will not help student writers and may even mislead them" (Ferris, 1999, p.4). In addition, teachers can confuse students by missing some error corrections like as Leki (1990) said, "the teachers miss errors; that sometimes minor errors are corrected and much more significant problems causing serious ambiguity in meaning go uncorrected" (p. 61). In spite of many unprepared and unpredicted conditions such as the absence of appropriate teacher training, the rapid and sudden change of English education environment and the others, teachers in Korea should learn/teach writing in English to help their students cope with the change of educational environment properly.

As another variable, student factor also has a lot of practical problems. Teachers should "be realistic in expectations" (Ferris, 1999, p.7). Students’ proficiency level and prior experience are various. For example, students in
English classrooms in Korea are not necessarily at the same proficiency level. On the contrary, many students take English language lessons privately either before or during their schooling, so usually there will be a lot of students with different proficiency levels within one classroom. Also, in EFL situations, not all the students need to write well in English. Usually, they want to improve their English proficiency including writing in English not for achieving fluency itself but for preparing to take a test and get a better grade. So up until becoming senior students in high school, they find little need to learn writing in English because Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test (KSAT) as part of university entrance test has not included explicitly any question related with writing except that a few of prestigious universities take writing as part of their matriculating process.

While L1 or ESL students must use their writing skills in- and out–side classroom, EFL students conceptually want to improve their English proficiency including writing in English and so try to seek the ways and situations, but actually they do not need higher level of English writing skills beyond and even in English language classroom like as above–mentioned. This factor should also be considered in teaching writing in EFL situations.

IV. WHAT KINDS OF ERROR CORRECTION WILL BE EFFICIENT AND POSSIBLE IN EFL SITUATIONS?

The ultimate goal of error correction is to help students improve their writing, so knowing what extent of error feedback from the teachers in teaching writing and how to help students correct errors in their writing will be proper and possible should be considered. In Leki’ s study (1992), she says that "teachers of ESL students need to recognize that they probably cannot cure very many grammar ills with conscious effort, and certainly not in the period of time institutionally designated for that purpose... ESL students can become very fluent writers of English, but they may never become indistinguishable from a native speaker, and it is unclear why they should"(p. 132). In another study (1990), she asks what goals in teaching writing to second language students needed to be considered: "Does L2 writing need to be error free or merely free of global errors that impede
understanding" (p. 58). Ferris (1997) says, "We also should be realistic in our expectations" (p. 7). For EFL students who do not have many opportunities to use and to even practice their writing, to be an error-free writer in their writing may be impossible.

Students’ writing abilities will vary, but considering that most of the students in EFL situations are likely to be beginners in English writing, explicit error corrections within errors that students are not able to correct for themselves such as syntax and vocabulary may be appropriate. In other words, in EFL contexts where students’ English proficiency level is not comparatively so high, direct feedback at the starting point may be more helpful. When their levels go up, the feedback can be changed gradually from "very explicit such as a verbal direction... to vague such as underlying form or putting a check mark in the margin without indicating what type of error has occurred or how to solve the problem" (Ferris, 2003, p.145). Ferris (2003) suggests that lower-level proficiency L2 students may be assisted by both direct error correction and grammatical rule teaching. However, direct error corrections may be dangerous because teachers may misunderstand the meaning of students’ writing and change the intensity and true meaning of students’ writing. Non-native writing teachers will be more likely to make this kind of mistake.

In Lee’s study (2004) of EFL college students in Hong Kong, indirect error feedback such as providing feedback on student errors without giving the correct forms or structures, by simply underlining the errors was very effective in improvement of accuracy, compared with not giving corrective feedback or presenting only a marginal check. Ferris and Roberts (2001) found that both groups such as one group which received marked error feedback with codes (such as "VT" which means verb tense) and the other group which was given underlined but not marked or labeled error feedback performed much better than the third group which did not have any feedback at all.

In her study (1999), Ferris used terms such as "treatable" and "untreatable" errors. She introduced that treatable errors are verb–tense and form, subject–verb agreement, article usage, plural and possessive noun endings, and sentence fragments which occur in a rule–governed way, and so students can resolve the errors by using a grammar book or set of rules. On the
contrary, untreated errors such as word choice errors, with the possible exceptions of some pronoun and preposition uses, and unidiomatic sentence structure are idiosyncratic and so require students to use acquired knowledge of the language to correct those errors (as cited in Bitchener et al., 2005).

In EFL contexts, "treatable" errors in students’ writing may be cured by teachers’ error feedback, while "untreatable" errors seem to require more intuition like as shown in native speakers. Considering that in most cases non-native teachers are likely to teach writing in English to students at the very beginning level in EFL contexts, the treatable error corrections seem to be more teachable and learnable for both teachers and students even though "untreatable" errors might be more likely to affect on the meaning of writing.

V. POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS IN ERROR CORRECTION IN EFL SITUATIONS

Lee wrote in a study (2004) that only slightly more than half of the teachers’ error correction was accurate. Truscott pointed in his writing (1996), teachers could not properly help students correct errors in their writing and if teachers are non-native, the situation could be worse. Ferris also agreed that "poorly done error correction will not help student writers and may even mislead them" (Ferris, 1999, p.4). In addition, Leki (1990) points that teachers sometimes correct trivial errors and leave significant ones causing serious misunderstanding in meaning. If teachers’ error correction misleads students, the efficacy of error correction may be useless and harmful like as Truscott pointed out (1996).

Here, teachers’ preparedness for teaching writing is of paramount importance. However, EFL situation, especially Korea, has all kinds of problems above-mentioned related with writing teachers. Most of the public schools’ English teachers are non-native who have not been trained enough to teach writing in English. How could they teach writing in English effectively? Considering that most of the students who should be taught how to write in English are at the very beginning level, starting to teach writing in English looks more or less simple. Students’ English proficiency is not relatively high, so direct and "treatable" (Ferris, 1999) error correction could resolve errors in students’ writing by using a grammar book or set of rules.
which Korean English teachers have been long accustomed to. But focusing on analyzing word by word and sentence by sentence grammatically is not a good way as already too much experienced. To help students improve their fluency and communicativeness in their writing should be priority when teachers give instruction to students on their writing. Within the original intensity of a writer, giving feedback focusing on ideas rather than grammar could be a way of teaching writing.

For teachers, Ferris (1999) suggested preparation, practice, and prioritizing as the answer to the practical problems in teacher part. According to her, teachers need a lot of background knowledge theoretically and methodologically. Also, teachers have many opportunities to exert teaching practically based on the ground. In addition, teachers should be able to prioritize to select students’ most serious errors and to give thorough feedback to them. In EFL situations, teachers handle a lot of students in one classroom. So if a teacher tried to give thorough feedback to each student, she/he would be exhausted in a short time and could not concentrate on the other important parts except error correction. Truscott (1999) also pointed that this work would consume a lot of time and energy and teachers could be burnout. Also, in a real class, "teachers are faced with the need to make countless unplanned decisions about what and how to teach" (Ellis, 1998, p.41). In this part, careful prioritizing seems the most important part in dealing with the possible practical problem.

Co-teaching with well-trained native writing teachers will be another alternative. The number of native English teachers in EFL contexts including Korea is increasing and this trend will be more accelerated. To work with native English teachers who are well trained enough not to mislead students in teaching writing by using their intuition as a native speaker may be desirable in two ways. First, non-native teachers will be able to learn how to teach and what to teach from this experience. Considering the level of Students’ English proficiency is not so high, non-native teachers will be able to cope with these situations with the help of native teachers. Non-native teachers may teach students grammar aligning with a little bit error correction within the extent of not discouraging students by overwhelming with correction to every single error. Secondly, native teachers can provide both non-native teachers and students with "untreatable" error
correction by using their intuition as a native speaker.

In Korea, the notion about writing in English is changing. Educational Authorities have decided to add writing ability in English as a part of selection criteria of hiring new English teachers. This change has tremendous meanings. It will cause Domino phenomenon in educational arena. To begin with, teachers’ college will focus on teaching writing in English. This change will affect on high school and middle school’s English education in a positive way. A lot of inputs will be considered in teaching writing and error correction in writing will be thought of as another subject of consideration.

In EFL context, error correction in teaching writing seems to be considered as a long leash in order to help students not drift away from the orbit. However, the flexibility of teachers’ part will be more important to not mislead students and to help them continue to write in English not losing interest and creativity.

REFERENCES


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