

# An Approach to Self-correction in Student Writing

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## INTRODUCTION

A major problem for Japanese undergraduates in English writing skills classes is that they do not apply previously gained knowledge and skills to adequately revise their writing. As a result, an instructor has to react to great amounts of writing that is riddled with basic errors that could be easily corrected by the students themselves. Additionally, Japanese students tend to see editing and error correction as something the instructor does for them, not as their own responsibility – the common experience of students in the Japanese school system tends to reinforce this attitude.

Concerning error correction, Ur (2009) offers this rationale:

[...] when we correct a student's error, our goal is to make him or her aware of what was wrong and what the correct form should have been so that the same error can be avoided in the future. The process is a conscious one: it involves explicit thinking 'about' the language rather than just using it for communication. (89)

While Ur's rationale is seemingly clear enough, the question writing instructors face is how to effectively inculcate in their students the habits and techniques necessary to not only become better self-correctors, but to gain the awareness that engaging in self-correction is in their interest if they truly want to become better writers. Employing these techniques autonomously requires an intrinsic motivation to become better writers, not simply doing so because the instructor requires it of them. One approach to this problem is devising a systematic, practical process to raise students' awareness concerning what sorts of mistakes they are making and the extent to which they are continually repeating them. This type of process can make the teaching of writing more efficient for the instructor as well as be a powerful tool for students to use in their quest for mastery of writing in the second language (L2).

In developing a systematic approach to error correction, there is a distinction to be made between mistakes that are 'errors' and those that are 'slips'. Spratt, et. al. (2005) define errors as those mistakes that are the result of learners trying to express an idea in a way that is beyond their level of competence in the L2, or the result of internalization of a linguistic rule that is inaccurate. The same authors define 'slips' as those mistakes that are not beyond the learner's level of competence, but occur because of carelessness, tiredness, being distracted, and lack of motivation (44). Ur (2009) offers basically the same definitions, but adds that the distinction is not useful because "the two are almost impossible to distinguish when they actually occur" (88). However, in the case of a writing instructor working with a homogenous group of learners with the same first language (L1), it is generally clear to the instructor what sorts mistakes are more likely errors and what sorts are most likely slips. Confirmation of the extent of students' linguistic knowledge and capabilities is swift when time and again an instructor can physically point to a problem in a paragraph such as subject-verb disagreement or the lack of an article, and time and again the student who has produced the writing notices the mistake and corrects the problem quickly and effectively by her or himself.

The most attainable form of correction in student self-correction then lies with identifying slips, primarily in grammar, word form, word order, spelling, formatting, and other mechanical aspects. Errors must continue to be addressed with additional instruction, examples and exercises, but slips can and should be handled by students themselves, once their awareness is raised, instead of being left to the instructor to identify and mark.

## **EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT: TYPE OF CLASS AND PARTICIPATING STUDENTS**

The process that is the focus of this paper is being used by the author in the English Writing Practice I, English Writing Practice II and Pre-seminar, or *Prezemi* classes in the Department of Arts and Letters at Kyoritsu Women's University. The English Writing Practice I and English Writing Practice II classes are generally for second year students and are held in the Spring and Fall terms respectively. The first term of the class is text-based and focuses on paragraph-level writing and the second focuses on multi-paragraph writing, for the most part using a standard five-paragraph model. In the first term, following the sequence laid out in the table of contents of the class text, writing assignments use standard modes such as definition, examples, process, comparison and contrast, space order, time order, description, classification and others. With the move to multi-paragraph writing in the second term, there is a focus on writing about

various aspects of literature, including story arc, types and development of characters, elements of setting, the use of symbols, motifs and themes, the relationship of the author to her or his work, and the place of a work of literature within a genre, social context and/or time period. Additionally, focus is put on the use of sourced information, in-text citation and creating a well formatted bibliography. The *Prezemi* class is primarily for third year students who are preparing to write a graduation thesis, and has many of the same foci listed above for the English Writing Practice II.

These classes are conducted in computer labs equipped with either Apple iMac or Windows based desktop computers. All writing is done online using google documents. As assignments are given, students create and share their assigned writing with the instructor as co-editor. Correction and feedback are given on the shared document by the instructor outside of class, in addition to comments, explanations and corrections given in class, along with examples of how to organize, format, improve cohesion or self-correct for technical problems.

In the English Writing Practice classes, the online The Vocabulary Size Test developed by Paul Nation of Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand is used to roughly determine the amount of English vocabulary students have acquired. Among students currently enrolled in the writing course mentioned above, English vocabulary size ranges from 4900 words to 7900 words. The most recent data on the range of TOEIC scores for this group of students is currently unavailable, but scores would generally fall between 350 and 550. Vocabulary size correlates closely with the level of writing a student can be expected to produce, and is therefore essential knowledge for designing class activities. The level of general English knowledge students possess, such as that which can be assumed from standardized test scores, is also useful when deciding how to pitch activities in terms of level of difficulty and sophistication.

## ACTIVITY PROCEDURE

In real terms, the systematic approach being discussed here consists of students producing paragraph or short essay length writing on a Google document shared with the instructor. After completing a writing assignment, students engage in individual self-correction and cataloging of their own errors. While editing, students use a checklist of common error types in the form of a Google spreadsheet created and shared by the instructor, an Error/Slip Log for grammar and formatting errors that students use to identify, categorize and quantify specific types of errors or slips they make (see Figure 1). As students find, categorize and quantify errors, they are encouraged to attempt to

correct the errors to the best of their ability. To facilitate editing of formatting and punctuation, students are provided with a brief, concise guide to refer to in order to see explanations and examples that allow them to self-correct these aspects. To facilitate control of grammar for the purpose of self-editing, students are provided with lists of links to online grammar exercises that include explanations, examples and exercises that help them to identify, understand and correct grammatical iniquities.

Following these steps, the writing is then reviewed and commented on by the instructor in order to vet the editing of students and call attention to errors that students may have missed. Feedback is provided on the draft using a simple system of changing text color to indicate where problems listed below occurred in the text or inserting a caret to indicate where a missing word(s) should be. More specific comments and corrections are inserted for those problems the instructor deems to be errors, i.e. beyond the capabilities of the students to recognize and correct. Following instructor feedback, students update their Error/Slip Log, updating numbers in categories of errors to include any they may have missed, and then go about correcting any additional errors discovered prior to a final review by the instructor. With reference to the problems shown in the Error/Slip Log to be the most prevalent, students can return to the link lists of exercises for additional self-study to address problems they themselves choose as areas of focus.

With access to all students' Error/Slip Logs, the instructor has a fairly easy way to categorize and quantify the types and frequencies of mechanical errors that are noticed by students individually and as a group. Though time consuming, the instructor can note which recurring errors are not being noticed and cataloged by students, and utilize that information to call students' attention to problems they habitually miss, to modify or augment lessons and materials and to address the most pressing writing problems, and hopefully avoid spending time and energy on the those writing issues which are can be dealt with by the students themselves.

## **MATERIALS AND IMPLEMENTATION**

The listing of types of errors included in the Error/Slip Log is based on a similar listing offered by Ferris (2009), who set out five broad categories of types of errors, some of which included a number of subcategories. For example, Ferris offers Type 1: Nouns, and within this type includes errors in noun endings and in article usage. As another example, Ferris includes within the category, Type 2: Verbs, subject-verb agreement, verb tense and verb form. Other types laid out by Ferris include Type 3: Punctu-

ation and Sentence Structure, including sentence fragments, comma errors, run-on sentences and semicolon errors, Type 4: Word Form Errors and Type 5: Preposition Errors.

In creating the Error/Slip Log spreadsheet, this author adapted and reorganized Ferris's listing in order to bring sharper focus on those errors seen to be most prevalent in the work of participating students. When the design of the log was in an early stage of development, and the amount of categories of errors included in the log was not set, ranging from 13 to as many as 20 categories. Currently, the 13 to 20 categories previously used in the log template spreadsheet have been collapsed into 10 broader categories, and include the following types of errors and slips in the first column on the left of the log with translations in Japanese.

- sentence/clause structure error (including fragments, run-ons, missing subjects, verbs, etc.)
- subject/verb agreement error
- active/passive error
- word form error (including problems with verb tense, part of speech, prefixes and/or suffixes, etc.)
- preposition error
- article error
- punctuation error
- spelling error
- capitalization error
- formatting error (including problems with the header, title, indents, line spacing, spacing between words, etc.)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1											
2		EW Grammar/Formatting Error Log									
3		Type of error	回数	回数	回数	回数	回数	回数	回数	回数	Total
4	1	sentence/clause structure error (文の構成の問題)									0.0
5	2	subject/verb agreement error (一人称・二人称・三人称の間違い)									0.0
6	3	active/passive error (動作動詞・受動態動詞の間違い)									0.0
7	4	word form error (語形の間違い・単数・複数・時勢・など)									0.0
8	5	preposition error (前置詞の間違い)									0.0
9	6	article error (冠詞の間違い)									0.0
10	7*	punctuation error (句読点の間違い)									0.0
11	8*	spelling error (スペルの間違い)									0.0
12	9*	capitalization error (大文字・小文字の間違い)									0.0
13	10*	formatting error - indent, title, spacing (書式・インデント、タイトル、スペース)									0.0
14		ErrorTotal	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
15		Assignment Title	Time Order Paragraph	Space Order Paragraph	Process & Direction Paragraph	Cause & Effect Paragraph	Examples Paragraph	Definition Paragraph	Classification Paragraph	Comparison & Contrast Paragraph	
16											

Figure 1 Grammar/Formatting Error Log Template

To the right of the column for “Type of error,” the spreadsheet includes columns for each of the writing assignments given during the term into which students input the number of each type of error. The right-most column includes a formula that totals the number of specific types of errors or slips, and a row across the bottom of the columns also includes a formula that totals the numbers of errors and slips per assignment. Properly used, the spreadsheet can show both student and instructor changes in the types and frequency of errors over the course of one term’s writing assignments, and improvement over time (or lack thereof) can easily be noted.

While not comprehensive, the list above includes the most commonly occurring errors among the population of students whose experience is the focus of this article. The number of categories is limited in order to avoid over burdening students, and to place their focus on two types of problems, those that are immediately within their power to correct, i.e. slips, and those that represent the most important and most common global errors in their own writing. The above list is not comprehensive and not meant to be left as is. Through the course of the term students are encouraged to revise the form as they gain control of the mechanics of their writing, and are free to delete rows for those categories of errors that they no longer make, merge rows that can be practically merged, or add rows for other types of errors which are not included but could be, depending on what problems a student wants to focus on going forward. While very few students actually take this initiative, it is important to leave open the option for students to take greater control of their learning process though making informed judgments about which mix of problems they think they should focus on.

## STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACTIVITY

In initial trials of this self-correction activity, it was confirmed that due to gaps in students’ knowledge of grammar, punctuation, and standard ways of expression, many errors went unnoticed during the self-correction process. To some extent, this may be unavoidable, and shows the limits of effectiveness of student-centered self-correction. However, the benefits of students engaging in reflection, revision and working out problems by themselves outweigh the time and effort required to follow up on the ‘corrections’ made by students.

After the most recently completed term in which the error/slip logs were used, participating students were surveyed to find out what they thought about the experience (see Appendix 1). The survey was brief and contained the following questions, response options and scoring for responses:

1. How helpful was using the Error / Slip Log to categorize your mistakes for improving your ability to write in English correctly?  
Responses - very helpful (3), helpful (2), somewhat helpful (1), not helpful (0)
2. Do you think the Error / Slip Log should continue to be used in English Writing Practice classes?  
Responses - Yes (1), No (0)
3. How easy was it the Error / Slip Log to use?  
Responses - very easy (3), easy (2), somewhat difficult (1), difficult (0)
4. Should the Error / Slip Log be redesigned?  
Responses - Yes (0), No (1)
5. If you answered Yes to the question above, how should the Error / Slip Log be changed?  
Responses - space provided for written comments

Results of the survey show that students are generally supportive of the idea of using the logs to identify, catalog and record the amounts and types of errors and slips they make. The assignment of scores to response options attribute the highest numbers to the most positive responses (see Appendix 1). A higher total of added scores indicates a more positive assessment of the utility of the log. The maximum total possible within one student's responses is a total score of eight. Averages were then calculated for each question in order to get a sense of how students generally respond to individual questions. The average total for all questions added together is 5.1 of 8.0 available points, or 63.75%, indicating students generally hold a more positive view of the log as a tool than negative, though the positive view is not particularly strong. Looking at responses for specific questions gives a more detailed view at how students evaluate the log as a tool. The average score for question 1 is 2.4 out of 3.0 points available, or 72% positive, placing students' collective response midway between helpful and very helpful. The average score for question 2 is 1.0 of 1.0 points available, or 100% positive, with all respondents indicating that they think the log should continue to be used in the English Writing Practice classes. The average score for question 3 is 1.8 out of 3.0, or 54% positive, with responses falling squarely between easy to use and somewhat difficult to use. The average score for question 4 is 0.9 out of 1.0 available points, with 90% of students answering no when asked whether or not the log should be redesigned. Question 5 asks students to suggest any changes they thought should be made in the design of the log

and/or the process of its use. Very few students chose to make comments. Those comments are listed below:

- It was easy to use. Attendance and submission of HW were easy to check. (translated)
- Ask my teacher about how to change the sentences.
- It was very easy to use. (translated)

One important factor that could have impacted impressions of ease of use is the degree to which the instructor interacts with and advises students on how to more effectively use the log. During the term in question, the instructor offered initial explanation of how to use the log early on in the term, but did little to follow up on advising and encouraging students in its use throughout the course of the term. As the term progressed, more motivated students continued to use the log as intended, but use of the log by less motivated students gradually tapered off, showing the necessity for active monitoring of student use of the log by the instructor.

## CONCLUSION

The goals behind development of this process are to raise awareness of students of their own errors and how to self-correct them, to compel students to behave as if they are responsible for that self-correction (to the extent they can do it), to add a reflective element to the writing process and to extend 'ownership' of the learning process to the learners.

Were these goals met? The answer is yes for those students who took the process seriously and made consistent use of the Error/Slip Log. For students who took time and care in their self-correction, over time there appeared to be a higher awareness of the types and frequency of various common errors. Anecdotal evidence and instructor impressions of progress over time point to serious users producing writing that is grammatically and syntactically more accurate and less error ridden. Additionally, students consistently going through the process of self-correcting prior to instructor correction seemed to have gained some confidence in their ability to self monitor. For students who were haphazard in their use of the instrument, results were more spotty in that there wasn't any obvious immediate or consistent improvement. The level of attainment for this effort, like all efforts in any class depend largely on the amount of effort exerted by the students engaged in the learning activity.

Evaluation of results of the continued use of the approach described above will facilitate not only improvement in its design and implementation, but also lead to a more nuanced understanding of the overall matrix of capabilities, including both strengths



and weakness, among the population of participating students. It is anticipated that a greater degree of acceptance and more facile use of the process by students will occur in future terms with a more robustly hands-on approach to helping students apply the vehicle in writing assignments, which will improve consistency in and motivation to use the vehicle, as well as better address problems of misuse.

Additionally, a more systematic collection and analysis of data quantifying change in the extent of mastery of students over mechanical aspects listed in the Error/Slip Log will help to bolster the rationale for its continued use. Most anticipated is the pleasure of seeing students take greater command of and responsibility for their development as writers in their chosen L2.

#### Works Cited

- Ferris, Dana. "Teaching Students to Self-Edit." *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2002. 328-34. Print.
- Spratt, Mary, Alan Pulverness, and Melanie Williams. *The TKT Course: Teaching Knowledge Test*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.
- Ur, Penny. *A Course in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. Print.

## Appendix 1 Opinion Survey: Error / Slip Log

## Opinion Survey: Error / Slip Log

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: After reading the question, circle the response which most closely expresses your opinion.

- 1) How helpful was using the Error / Slip Log to categorize your mistakes for improving your ability to write in English correctly?

Very helpful ----- helpful ----- somewhat helpful ----- not helpful

- 2) Do you think the Error / Slip Log should continue to be used in used in English Writing Practice classes?

Yes ----- No

- 3) How easy was the Error / Slip Log to use?

Very easy ----- easy ----- somewhat difficult ----- very difficult

- 4) Should the Error / Slip Log be redesigned?

Yes ----- No

- 5) If you answered Yes to the question above, how should the Error / Slip Log be changed?  
(Please feel free to write your answer in either English or Japanese.)

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## Appendix 2 Opinion Survey Result: Error / Slip Log

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1		<b>Error / Slip Log Survey Data</b>	<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Q3</b>	<b>Q4</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Q5 Comments on redesign</b>
2	1	name deleted	--	--	--	--	--	no response
3	2	name deleted	--	--	--	--	--	no response
4	3	name deleted	--	--	--	--	--	no response
5	4	name deleted	2.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	4.0	no comment
6	5	name deleted	2.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	4.0	no comment
7	6	name deleted	3.0	1.0	3.0	1.0	7.0	no comment
8	7	name deleted	2.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	5.0	no comment
9	8	name deleted	3.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	6.0	It was easy to use. Attendance and submission of HW were easy to check. (translated)
10	9	name deleted	--	--	--	--	--	no response
11	10	name deleted	3.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	5.0	no comment
12	11	name deleted	--	--	--	--	--	no response
13	12	name deleted	2.0	1.0	3.0	1.0	6.0	no comment
14	13	name deleted	3.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	5.0	no comment
15	14	name deleted	2.0	1.0	2.0	0.0	5.0	Ask my teacher about how to change the sentences.
16	15	name deleted	2.0	1.0	1.0	0.0	4.0	It was very easy to use. (translated)
17	16	name deleted	2.0	1.0	3.0	1.0	6.0	no comment
18	17	name deleted	3.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	6.0	no comment
19	18	name deleted	--	--	--	--	--	no response
20	19	name deleted	2.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	5.0	no comment
21	20	name deleted	2.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	4.0	no comment
22	21	name deleted	--	--	--	--	--	no response
23		<b>Averages</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>5.1</b>	
24								
25		<b>Response coding</b>						<b>Response totals</b>
26		Q1) How helpful was using the Error / Slip Log to categorize your mistakes for improving your ability to write in English correctly?						Maximum total rating = 8.0 / Average total rating = 5.1 (63.75% positive)
27		Very helpful = 3						Q1 = 2.4 of 3.0 (72% positive)
28		helpful = 2						Q2 = 1.0 of 1.0 (100% positive)
29		somewhat helpful = 1						Q3 = 1.8 of 3.0 (54% positive)
30		not helpful = 0						Q4 = 0.9 of 1.0 (90% positive)
31								
32		Q2) Do you think the Error / Slip Log should continue to be used in English Writing Practice classes?						
33		Yes = 1						
34		No = 0						
35								
36		Q3) How easy was it the Error / Slip Log to use?						
37		Very easy = 3						
38		easy = 2						
39		somewhat difficult = 1						
40		difficult = 0						
41								
42		Q4) Should the Error / Slip Log be redesigned?						
43		Yes = 0						
44		No = 1						
45								
46		Q5) If you answered Yes to the question above, how should the Error / Slip Log be changed?						