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Error Treatment Strategies Used by NS and NNS ESL Writing Teachers¹

Ruja Pholsward

University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce

Abstract

The paper reports on an exploratory study of error treatment strategies used by NS and NNS ESL writing teachers at four Thai universities. In the study, the researcher investigated two important issues for ESL writing teachers: (a) how and to what extent they should tackle errors in students' work, and (b) how they can make their error treatment strategies sufficient to facilitate students' self-correction while not disparaging the latter with heavy marking or editing.

Empirical data was collected from 32 university writing teachers by means of interview and questionnaire². The findings reveal teachers' attitudes toward errors--part of the learning process or the teacher editing or correcting responsibility--as determinants for their choice of error treatment strategies, which tend to set priority either in correctness or communication. The results also point to a need for NS and NNS writing teachers to adjust their strategies for effective teaching.

1 A paper presented at the 1998 RELC Seminar 20-22 April 1998

2 The researcher would like to express her grateful thanks to all NS and NNS subjects for their time and kind assistance in providing data for the study.

1. Introduction

Of the four language skills, writing has been regarded by most ESL teachers as the most difficult skill to be acquired by learners. This is due to the fact that learners, prior to their language mastery, have to cope with linguistic deficiencies as well as the logical development of ideas unique to the target language. Therefore, language teachers have to find effective ways to help learners overcome those limitations. During the teaching and practice of writing skills, teachers have to handle learner errors tactfully; and not be too disparaging. At the same time, they should not allow students to be trapped in fossilized errors that certainly affect message comprehensibility. Being aware of problems encountered by ESL writing teachers, the researcher felt the need to investigate error treatment strategies used by NS and NNS ESL university teachers to facilitate their students' learning process and help improve writing performance. The information obtained is expected to generate implications for effective ESL writing pedagogy and teacher training in the area of error treatment.

2. The Study

2.1 Research Background

There have been quite a number of studies on teachers' error treatments and problems encountered as reported in the ESL literature from the seventies to the nineties. Those studies published in international language journals tend to investigate three major areas: (a) effective correction methods used by teachers, (b) self-correction, and (c) learners' attitudes or reactions to teachers'

correction methods. To take a few as examples, Chaudron (1984) investigated the efficiency of two methods: teacher correction and peer correction. Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1985) examined correction methods that work best with Japanese students, and Freedman (1987) looked at correction methods preferred by teachers and students. In the area of self-correction, Beaven (1977) recommended a list of critical questions for learners to check their own work, MacKay (1983) suggested a self-evaluation method, and Zamel (1985) investigated teachers' comments for students to improve their work. In an attempt to facilitate the learning process, some researchers explored learners' attitudes towards teachers' comments and corrections; for example Hahn (1986), Cohen (1987), Lang Jr. and Evans (1987), and Radecki and Swales. (1988)

Correction research in Thailand also falls into three major areas similar to those in international publications. In particular, researchers who reported their studies tend to focus on the issues of self correction and they expressed a mixed concern over the use of correction methods, along with related problems, opinions, and reactions to the used correction methods from both teachers and students. A few examples are as follows: Jacobs (1987) explored the use of peer feedback for self correction with Thai students at Chiangmai University and reported mixed reactions to the method. Chabtanom (1987) investigated correction methods used with teacher trainee students, problems encountered, and teachers' opinion on students' errors. Sitachinpong (1990) examined opinions of teachers and students on writing correction

methods used at the grade 9 level in Bangkok. Roengpraj (1991) also studied opinions of university teachers and students on correction methods and related problems. Recently, Wongsothorn et al. (1993) reported a study on correction methods most preferred by Thai university students, which clearly marked a heavy emphasis on teacher responsibility for correction.

2.2 Rationale and Objectives

The Thai context of ESL writing pedagogy is generally characterized by a large class size and a focus on teachers' correction responsibilities. Many ESL writing teachers have found it difficult to tolerate errors in students' work for fear that errors, if not identified and corrected immediately, will not be recognized by their students, and that if not correcting, they are not performing their teaching duties properly. It seems an uphill task for teachers to shift their correcting responsibilities to learners so that the latter can identify errors and correct their own work. This type of attitude evidently results from the cultural impact of the Thai teaching context that puts the teacher in an authoritative or a leading role. Inevitably, such a view does not support learners' self correction. Worse still, to many teachers, correction efforts and time spent do not necessarily pay off, as students appear to pay more attention to grades than corrections and are not willing to rewrite as part of their learning process.

Considering the identified problems, the researcher felt the need to explore error treatment strategies used by ESL writing teachers--both native and non-native speakers

of English--and see whether the attitude factor determined their choice of error treatment strategies. Two specific research questions were:

1. How and to what extent should NS and NNS ESL writing teachers tackle errors in students' work?
2. How can they make their error treatment strategies sufficient to facilitate students' self correction and not disparage the latter with heavy marking or editing?

It was expected that the information obtained could generate implications for practical adjustments of error treatment strategies as well as provide information needed for teacher training in the area of error treatment.

2.3 Methodology

A. Instrument

An instrument was constructed to collect data from NS and NNS writing teachers. It contained three parts: (1) subjects' personal data and their ESL teaching experience, (2) types of errors most often encountered, correction methods used to treat errors in individual papers and in class, and problems concerning the use of particular treatment strategies, and (3) information on the use of specific classroom treatment strategies. In particular, the third part was initially designed to secure information on the strategies used in the classroom setting by means of classroom observation; however, restricted availability of the subjects resulted in the use of interviews and questionnaires as well. The instrument was piloted and revised for clarity of the given questions. (See details of the instrument in Appendix A.)

B. Subjects

The subjects were 32 ESL writing teachers (10 NS+22 NNS) from four universities in Bangkok: Chulalongkorn (CU), Thammasat (TU), Rangsit (RU), and University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC). The use of subjects from both government (CU and TU) and private (RU and UTCC) universities aimed at a comprehensive view of error treatment with students at comparable levels of proficiency.

On a voluntary basis, it was first planned that eight subjects should be drawn from each institution, comprising 2 NS+6 NNS. The NS-NNS proportion was set in accordance with the ESL writing situation in Thailand in which NNS teachers usually outnumbered their NS counterparts. However, the case was slightly different at Rangsit and the researcher had 4 NS+4 NNS instead. (See details of the subjects in Tables NS 1 and NNS 1.)

2.4 Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The subjects were contacted by mail or telephone for their voluntary participation. With the use of the constructed instrument, the researcher collected data by means of interview and questionnaire for all three parts and four subjects provided information in the third part by means of classroom observation. As for written responses to the questions, the subjects permitted data clarification by telephone, if needed. Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes, in person or by telephone; each classroom observation took about 30-40 minutes as well. The time spent on data collection from 32 subjects was three months.

The data obtained for this exploratory study was analyzed quantitatively by frequency and percentage, and qualitatively by description of the subjects' error treatment strategies and problems concerned. Points of difference and similarity in NS and NNS error treatments were described and discussed for pedagogic implications.

3. Results and Discussion

This part reports and discusses results according to the order of questions used in the instrument. It begins with the subjects' data, followed by the types of errors, treatment priority, error perception and methods used, problems concerned, and specific classroom strategies.

3.1 Subjects' Variables

As seen in Table NS 1, the majority of the subjects (9/10=90%) were male, with an age range of 20+ to 40+, holding master's or bachelor's degrees with ESL teaching certificates. More than half have had 1-5 years of work experience particularly with their correction training. Half of the subjects taught ESL writing courses at the intermediate level and the other half at the high intermediate to advanced levels.

Table NNS 1 presents 22 NNS subjects, mostly female (20/22=91%) with an age range of 30+ to 40+ and more than half with their work experience ranging from 1-15 years. The majority (18/22=82%) received no error treatment training. Most subjects (16/22=73%) taught intermediate-level courses while the rest (6/22=27%) taught at the high intermediate or advanced level. The data shown in Tables NS 1 and NNS 1 indicates that the subjects, all ESL trained, can serve as valid informants for the study.

Table NS 1: NS Subjects' Variables

Age	Sex	Academic Qualifications	Writing Course by Year	Years of Experience	Error Treatment Training
20 + (2)	M (9)	Master's (6)	Year 1 (5)	1-5 (6)	Yes (6)
30 + (4)	F (1)	Bachelor's (4)	Year 2 (-)	6-10 (1)	No (4)
40 + (2)			Year 3 (3)	11-15 (2)	
50 + (2)			Year 4 (1)	16+ (1)	
			Grad (1)		

Notes: (1) N=10; figures in brackets indicate frequency of responses

(2) Number of NS subjects by institution:

Chulalongkorn University (Language Institute) (CU) = 2

Thammasat University (Language Center) (TU) = 2

Rangsit University (Faculty of Liberal Arts) (RU) = 4

University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce

(Faculty of Humanities) (UTCC) = 2

Table NNS 1: NNS Subjects' Variables

Age	Sex	Academic Qualifications	Writing Course by Year	Years of Experience	Error Treatment Training
20 + (4)	M (2)	Master's (20)	Year 1 (12)	1-5 (7)	Yes (4)
30 + (5)	F (20)	Doctoral (2)	Year 2 (4)	6-10 (4)	No (18)
40 + (9)			Year 3 (3)	11-15 (3)	
50 + (4)			Year 4 (-)	16-20 (4)	
			Grad (3)	21-25 (1)	
				26-30 (3)	

Notes: (1) N=22; figures in brackets indicate frequency of responses

(2) Number of NNS subjects by institution:

Chulalongkorn University (Language Institute) (CU) = 6

Thammasat University (Language Center) (TU) = 6

Rangsit University (Faculty of Liberal Arts) (RU) = 4

University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce

(Faculty of Humanities) (UTCC) = 6

3.2 Errors of Highest Frequency and Treatment Priority

The subjects were asked about their error treatment background on the types of errors they have encountered most often and the priority of their treatment for the identified errors. As seen in Table NS 2, the majority of NS subjects (7/10=70%) found grammatical errors more frequent than lexical and organizational errors. However, half of the subjects gave priority of treatment to organizational errors, which they claimed to be affecting communication. Three said they treated grammatical errors first while the other two had no priority and treated all kinds of errors equally.

The NNS subjects (14/22=64%) reported that they have encountered

grammatical errors more often than lexical and organizational errors, while five subjects said they found all kinds of errors frequent in students' work. Thirteen subjects indicated their treatment priority in grammatical errors.

Tables NS 2 and NNS 2 reveal that the NS teachers pay more attention to organizational errors while their NNS counterparts put more emphasis on grammatical errors. When examining a possible relationship between the level of courses taught and their treatment priority (for example the high-level course and organizational emphasis), the researcher found only weak evidence (3/22=14%) supporting such a possibility.

Table NS 2: Errors of Highest Frequency and Treatment Priority

Error Type	Highest Frequency	Treatment Priority
Lexical	1	-
Grammatical	7	3
Organizational	1	5
All	1	2

Note: N=10; figures indicate frequency of responses

Table NNS 2: Errors of Highest Frequency and Treatment Priority

Error Type	Highest Frequency	Treatment Priority
Lexical	2	2
Grammatical	14	13
Organizational	1	4
All	5	3

Note: N=22; figures indicate frequency of responses

3.3 Error Perception and Error Treatment Strategies

From Table NS 3, the majority of NS subjects (7/10=70%) considered errors as part of the learning process caused by incomplete or insufficient knowledge. When dealing with errors in individual student papers, most subjects (7/10=70%) chose the identifying method. As for the in-class treatment, all but one used the whole class method, which provides opportunities for learners to see common error samples and try their own correction, followed by immediate feedback from the teacher.

The NNS subjects obviously perceived errors quite differently from their NS counterparts. More than half (14/22=64%), though recognizing errors in the learning process, preferred correcting or editing students' work, while only three said that they tried the identifying method for students to rewrite their own work and hopefully lead themselves to self-correction. The NNS subjects tended to use the whole class method for explanation or class correction of common errors.

It should be noted that the NNS subjects explained that quite often, if time permitted, they would use the individual (2/22=9%) and pair/group (4/22=18%) methods to encourage

peer feedback before presenting the finished work on the board or transparencies for class editing.

When looking at the NNS subjects' responses, the researcher found that peer pressure at work apparently affected the choice of error treatment strategies. For example, at one university, most NNS teachers used the editing method and students therefore set their expectations accordingly and as a result showed dissatisfaction with the identifying method. At the other university, more experienced teachers turned to the editing method while those less experienced preferred the identifying method. At the third university, it was clear that the course manager prescribed the identifying method and most teachers followed that trend. At the fourth university, most experienced teachers chose the editing method, except one turned to individualized correction in class to provide immediate feedback for self-correction and prevent peer copying. It can be seen that besides error perception, the institutional trend and students' expectations also helped determine the choice of error treatment strategies used by NNS teachers. However, this was not the case with NS subjects, whose error perception appeared to determine their choice of error treatment strategies.

Table NS 3: Error Perception and Error Treatment Strategies

Error Perception	Error Treatment Strategies	
	Individual Paper	In Class
Focus on teacher's responsibility in identifying and correcting errors (3)	Editing (3)	Whole class (9)
Focus on the learning process and learners' self-correction (7)	Identifying errors for rewriting (7)	Individual (-) Pair/group (1)

Notes: (1) N=10; figures in brackets indicate frequency of responses
 (2) Whole class = error explanation + class editing
 Pair/Group = peer correction

Table NNS 3: Error Perception and Error Treatment Strategies

Error Perception	Error Treatment Individual Paper	Strategies In Class
Focus on teacher's responsibility in identifying and correcting errors (14)	Editing (19)	Whole class (16)
Focus on the learning process and learners' self-correction (8)	Identifying errors-for rewriting (3)	Individual (2) Pair/group (4)

Notes: (1) N=22; figures in brackets indicate frequency of responses

(2) Whole class = error explanation + class editing

Pair/Group = peer correction

3.4 Strategy-Related Problems and Teachers' Solutions/Suggestions

Tables NS 4 and NNS 4 report problems arising from the use of error treatment strategies, problem criticality, and solutions or suggestions given by the subjects. As for the NS subjects, frequent problems rested on students' poor attention and lack of abilities to use the identified errors for self-correction. Problem criticality also fell along this direction--students paying more attention to grades than correcting errors. Their major suggestion pointed to small class size to accommodate individual attention and feedback for learners.

The NNS subjects identified the time-consuming aspect of the editing method as the

major problem (10/22=46%). Other problems dealt with students repeating the same errors (4/22=18%) and students being unable to utilize the teacher's identified errors for self-correction (4/22=18%). The three most critical problems were time limitation (9/22=41%), students repeating the same errors (5/22=23%) and class size (4/22=18%). Like the NS subjects, the NNS teachers suggested smaller classes (9/22=41%) and the need for correction training (4/22=18%) which could help them adjust their error treatment strategies. It can be seen that the NNS subjects identified quite a variety of problems and gave more than one answer for each category, while some reserved their answers in this part.

Table NS 4: Strategy-Related Problems and Teachers' Solutions/Suggestions

Strategy - Related Problems	Problem Criticality	Solutions/Suggestions
Students being unable to follow teachers' identifying devices (e.g., underlining, coding, using symbols, marking schemes, etc.) (3)	Students being grade-conscious (3)	Smaller classes (5)
Students paying no attention to teachers' error identification (3)	Students not recognizing the importance of self-correction (2)	Correction training desirable (2)
Students repeating the same errors (1)	Time limitation (1)	Revision or rewriting (1)
Large classes (1)	Students repeating the same errors (1)	Writing lab desirable (1)
Copying (1)	Class size (1)	
	Copying (1)	

Notes: N=10; figures in brackets indicate frequency of responses; one subject did not specify any problems.

Table NNS 4: Strategy-Related Problems and Teachers' Solutions/Suggestions

Strategy - Related Problems	Problem Criticality	Solutions/Suggestions
Editing--time-consuming(10)	Time limitation (9)	Smaller classes (9)
Students repeating the same errors (4)	Students repeating the same errors (5)	Correction training desirable (4)
Students being unable to follow teachers' identifying devices (e.g., underlining, coding, using symbols, marking schemes, etc.) (4)	Class size (4)	Preparation exercises prior to writing assignments (3)
Students not paying attention to teachers' correction (3)	Students not paying attention to their own errors (3)	Emphasis on writing task models (2)
Large classes (3)	Students not recognizing the importance of self-correction (3)	Separate (not integrated skills) writing course desirable (2)
Students not trusting peer correction (2)		Rewriting/revising (1)
Copying (1)		Individualized correction (1)
		Writing lab desirable (1)

Notes: N=22; figures in brackets indicate frequency of responses; some subjects reserved their answers while others gave more than one answer for each category.

4. Error Treatment in the Classroom

The third part of the instrument examines the operationality and efficiency of the error treatment strategies used by particular teachers. Initially, data collection was to be carried out by classroom observation but restricted availability and reluctance of subjects made it difficult for the researcher to follow this plan. Only four observations were completed, and interviews and questionnaires had to be used with the rest of the subjects.

From the interviews (1 NS+6 NNS) and responses to the questionnaires (8 NS+13 NNS), most subjects (except a few who opted for heavy editing) preferred the class editing method which accommodated analyses of common errors, students' work on the board or transparencies, followed by the students participating in editing the work together. Whenever appropriate, the subjects also used pair or group work (with or without a peer correction requirement) prior to the class editing method. In their view, the class editing method evidently yielded favorable teacher-student interaction in class as well as students' positive reaction to the teacher's error treatment.

As for classroom management, all subjects were positive about flexible seating in that it could facilitate teacher-student interaction, particularly with pair or group work.

Four classroom observations (1 NS+3 NNS) shed some light on the operationality and efficiency of the selected error treatment strategy. There were three strategies used: individualized correction (1 NNS), whole class explanation (1 NNS) and the class editing

method (1 NS + 1 NNS). It can be concluded that favorable teacher-student interaction and students' positive reaction to the strategy used largely depended on the teacher's dynamic personality. Secondly, individualized correction could be made more effective with a seating arrangement that allowed more space among students for concentration and better access. It should be noted that students' intermittent talking to peers inevitably reduced the degree of attention and concentration required for effective learning. It seems without doubt that regardless of the course level and teaching context, the teacher remains the key element in making the selected method operational and effective for his or her students.

5. Conclusion

The data obtained from both the NS and NNS subjects provided sufficient answers to the two research questions. Firstly, how and to what extent the ESL writing teachers should tackle errors in students' work. Secondly, how they can make their error treatment strategies sufficient to facilitate students' correction, as follows:

(1) The methods used by the NS and NNS subjects in the study fall into two categories: the correcting or editing method (usually without rewriting or revising required), and the identifying method for students' self-correction (with a rewriting or revising requirement).

(2) When using either method, the subjects in fact expected their students to be able to find their own errors and correct their own work.

(3) The choice of either method is believed by the teacher to facilitate the students' learning process, i.e., self-correction. However, the NNS teachers were affected by the attitude that by correcting students' work, they performed their teaching duties properly. Besides, peer pressure on the preferred method expected by their students also determined their choice of correcting method. In contrast, the NS subjects, with their perception of errors as part of the learning process, considered it to be their role to make students aware of their own errors and perform self-correction.

(4) Considering the choice of the correction methods and influencing factors seen in the NS and NNS subjects' responses, we can see that both groups take a firm stand using the method they personally believed to work for their students and did not adjust their method according to learner language abilities, teaching circumstances, and pedagogic focus.

With self-correction as the ultimate goal, teachers have to consider the suitability of their preferred method. That is to say, the editing method may be suitable for poor students who often find it difficult to cope with the identifying method. If the teaching circumstance generates a large class size, the teacher may resort to the identifying method in pair or group work, followed by the class method for whole class explanation or class editing to help students become aware of their own errors.

In addition, knowing the pedagogic focus enables teachers to treat errors selectively, and not to treat all kinds of errors equally, which in turn imposes a burden on themselves as well as their students. It is, therefore, important for teachers to take these factors into consideration and adjust their error treatment to make self-correction possible for their students.

The Author

Ruja Pholsward has a Ph. D. in Applied Linguistics from the University of Toronto, Canada. She is now holding the position of Vice-President for Academic Affairs at the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce. Her research interests and published works involve EAP reading, business communication, learning and teaching strategies, and EBT needs assessment.

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Appendix A : Cover Letter and Instrument

University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce
Faculty of Humanities

Date

Dear ESL Teacher:

I would like to ask for your assistance in providing information on your experience with error treatments in ESL writing, and permission to observe your error treatment in the classroom. This is the procedure of data collection in the research project titled " An exploratory Study of Error Treatment Strategies Used by NS and NNS ESL Writing Teachers in Four Thai Universities." The purpose of the study is to identify the treatment of errors and strategies used by NS and NNS ESL teachers when dealing with student errors. It is expected that the obtained information will generate implications for appropriate adjustments in the treatment of errors to particular teaching circumstances, and serve as guidelines for language training and workshops for ESL teachers.

Your time and co-operation in this matter are highly appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

Ruja Pholsward, Ph. D.

For contact:

Office tel. 275-2200 Ext. 2431 Home tel. 993-2618

Would you kindly permit the researcher to call you for data clarification and to observe your error treatment in the classroom for 15 minutes? If yes, please specify the date and time convenient to you. Name: Date:

Time..... Your telephone number for contact.....

An Exploratory Study of Error Treatment Strategies Used by NS and NNS
ESL Writing Teachers in Four Thai Universities

Ruja Pholsward

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Questionnaire on Error Treatment Strategies

Part I : Personal Data

Name-Last Name Age Sex.....
Writing course(s) or writing related course(s) and proficiency level(s) taught
.....
University
University AddressTelephone
Teaching Experience in ESL Writing month(s)..... year(s).....
Last Degree or Qualification obtained
In-service training on correction methods receivedYes No
Details
.....

Part II : Error Treatment

A. Treatment Background

1. What types of errors have you encountered most often in student writing--lexical, grammatical, or organizational?
2. Among the errors you have encountered, how do you approach them in priority and why?
3. What are your general attitudes toward errors in student writing with regard to learners and teachers?
 - (a) Learners--part of learning process (hypothesizing), insufficiency/lack of understanding of study points, or carelessness/inattentiveness?
 - (b) Teachers--responsibility to pinpoint errors to students, part of evaluation process?

B. Methods

1. What method(s) do you use to treat errors in student papers? Please explain.
2. What methods(s) (individual/pair/group/class) do you use in the classroom? Please explain.

C. Problems

1. Have you identified any problems involved in the methods used when marking individual papers and approaching students (individual/pair/group/class) in the classroom? What are they? Please explain.
2. Among those problems identified, how do you rank them in terms of criticality and why?
3. In your teaching circumstance, what practical solutions have you tried or wished to see tried with the identified problems? What improvements do you need for the present teaching condition (e.g., in-service training for error treatment, change in curriculum/course administration, etc.)?

Part III : Error Treatment in Classroom*

1. Error treatment strategies (individual/pair/group/class) used in the classroom and how.
2. Classroom management (i.e., physical arrangement and class control) when each strategy/method is used.
3. Teacher-student interaction in the classroom especially with the use of a particular error treatment strategy.
4. Students' reaction to the error treatment strategy used in the classroom.

Additional remarks (if any)
.....

*Based on the subjects' voluntary participation in the study, they could choose to supply the target information by means of (a) interview (1 NS + 6 NNS), (b) questionnaire (8 NS + 13 NNS), or (c) classroom observation (1 NS + 3 NNS).