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Ann Raimes

ERRORS: WINDOWS INTO THE MIND

Imagine a classroom. The teacher tells the students to take out paper and pencil to write a paragraph. Johnny waves his hand and calls out "I ain't got no pencil." "No, no Johnny," the teacher admonishes. "I don't have a pencil, he doesn't have a pencil, we don't have any pencils, they don't have any pencils." Johnny interrupts in disgust, "Ain't nobody got no pencils?" (adapted from Brown, 1987, p. 31).

This is a familiar classroom scene: the student attending to communication, to saying something for a purpose; the teacher attending not to what is said but to whether it is grammatically correct. We all know that error correction in the middle of a conversation is intrusive. It cuts across real communication; it negates the point the speaker wants to make.

Communicative speech is not the best situation for us to help students correct their errors in English. Writing provides a more appropriate setting. The nature of writing is such that we produce a visible record of what we say. We can write our ideas, then look at them, reflect, monitor, make changes, add, delete, edit. Peter Elbow (1985) has said that writing is "the ideal medium for getting it wrong" (p. 286). It's also the ideal situation to learn to get it right. When language students write, they have time on their side: time to test hypotheses, to take risks, to make errors, and then to correct them.

When looking at a piece of writing, teachers have to respond to grammatical errors as well as to rhetoric (content and organization). In the 1960s, we had an avoidance policy on error. Based on behavioral principles and audiolingual habit-formation theories, we asked students to perform tasks that they were 98% certain to get right. We gave neat drills: repetition, substitution, and so on. We assigned controlled compositions that we didn't even have to read, just had to check whether the underlined words had been correctly

Ann Raimes has taught writing to ESL students at Hunter College, CUNY, for 20 years.

changed from, say, the present to the past tense. When we did let our students graduate to actual composing, we tried to address everything all at once: content, organization, style, syntax, mechanics, grammar, and spelling. Since the 1970s, though, errors have been regarded not so much as serious flaws in learning, to be avoided or corrected immediately, but as evidence of language acquisition that provides valuable feedback to both students and teachers (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982).

The focus on communicative approaches that began in the late 70s has led us to pay more attention to the purpose of language, to the message a speaker or writer intends to get across (Savignon, 1983). We let students not only speak more freely but also write more freely, and we don't necessarily correct everything they produce. They fill pages with their freewriting, journals, and multiple drafts. The question remains for teachers, though: If we don't deal with errors, will they become fossilized, that is, permanently engraved in the learner's language repertoire? Or will someone suspect we don't recognize the errors? Will we be perceived as lazy, not doing our job? None of these are desirable outcomes and add to the teacher's concerns about how to handle errors.

Since a teacher's response on a student's paper is potentially an influential text in a writing class (Raimes, 1988), we need to examine our practices carefully. Research on teacher response to writing provides help on the issues of where to write comments on students' papers, whether to correct or indicate the location of errors, and, most important of all, how necessary it is to assign a follow-up activity to the given feedback. On the issue of whether it is best to write comments at the end of an essay, in the margins, or between the lines, studies by Stiff (1967) and Bata (1972) have found that where we put comments has no effect on the writing of college freshmen. If we worry about whether to correct errors or simply indicate their locations, it is probably better to do the latter, not only because it's less time consuming, but also because, as Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) have found, indication of errors improves accuracy just as much as correction. In addition, according to Cohen and Cavalcanti's (1990) research, students report only "making a mental note" (p. 169) of teachers' comments, which is tantamount to saying that they glance briefly at a paper a teacher spent half an hour marking and then they put it away.

There's another reason not to spend a long time on correction. Vivian Zamel (1985) has shown us how teachers can significantly misread students' intentions and rewrite sentences according to the "ideal texts" that they hold in their heads (p. 81). To make certain that

the students' ideas are being communicated accurately, it is essential to put the burden of rewriting and editing back on the students.

Just as important as the corrections the teacher writes on the students' papers are the tasks assigned after the papers are returned to the students. Lees (1988) proposes seven modes of commenting on students' papers: correcting, emoting (such as "Nice!" or "I'm bored here"), describing, suggesting, questioning, reminding, and assigning. While the first three put the burden on the teacher, the next three try to shift the burden to the student. Only assigning, "creating another assignment based on what a student has written," provides a way to "discover how much of that burden the student has taken" (Lees, 1988, p. 266).

Some second language research studies stress frequent opportunities for writing and rewriting as an important tool for improving both content and accuracy. Fathman and Whalley (1990), in their study of types of written feedback and its effects on revision, conclude, "All students, irrespective of the kind of feedback they received from the teacher, improved the content of their compositions when they rewrote them" (p. 187). In a study of students' drafts in a City University of New York classroom (Raimes, 1988, March), I found that the number of errors students made per T-unit decreased by 20% on a second draft, even when the teacher's response included no explicit correction of errors.

While recognizing that addressing content is important, we need to recognize also that we cannot ignore grammar errors and hope that they will disappear eventually. They might disappear if our students could have many years of intensive communicative practice with the language. But the reality with many of the immigrant students in college classrooms today is that they have to improve the accuracy of their written English in one or two semesters to write term papers, compete with native speakers with advanced courses, and enter graduate school or the job market with no disadvantage. So what can we do in place of correcting errors? How can we shift the burden of error correction to the students? The following six strategies address the problem.

First, whatever system we choose for marking errors in writing, we have to let our students know what that system is. Students frequently have no idea what *frag* or *awk* means, no idea why there is a question mark above a word, no idea what *agr* means, and certainly no idea why a paper earns a "B" rather than an "A." There's no point in spending time searching for the perfect system of marking errors in student writing. There isn't one. The one thing above all that will help any marking system is if our students understand it. So if we

want to comment only on ideas in a first draft and save comments on accuracy until a later draft, our students should be told that. Otherwise they may assume everything uncorrected in the first draft is accurate, and they can drop their critical stance. It is useful to write out (for ourselves as well as for our students) what our policy on response is, what symbols and abbreviations we intend to use, and particularly what we expect students to do with their drafts and our comments when they receive them.

Second, we should relate our comments to the task we assign. Writing theorists distinguish between two aspects of writing: "composition" and "transcription" (Smith, 1982, p. 19), or "creating" and "criticizing" (Elbow, 1981, p. 7). If we give our students the opportunity first to express their ideas in English and then to scrutinize what they have written in order to make changes, then we should give ourselves the same two-stage response. When our students are, as Smith (1982) says, being "authors" (p.20) and composing, then we'll respond with guidance and constructive comments; when they are being "secretaries" (p. 20), looking at transcription and focusing on accuracy of presentation, then we, too, can turn our attention to that.

I usually try to separate these concerns by telling students they will write two drafts of an essay. I comment on the ideas and organization on the first reading, but I usually don't write on the student's paper at this point. Rather, I write on a separate sheet, or use adhesive, removable notes to write comments on and stick them next to the relevant passages. However, to take advantage of adult learners' concerns for grammatical accuracy, I often pick up a recurring type of error. Then, I refer students to a grammar handbook, or write an explanation, or arrange a one-on-one conference. But I make it clear that I don't necessarily expect them to correct or even reproduce the structure in the next draft. Any work on grammar at this point is separate from and parallel to the draft they are working on. But once students have rewritten the drafts, I indicate grammatical errors. I do this on their papers, usually by underlining, and I expect the students to correct those errors, either by rewriting the whole piece or by deleting the errors and writing in their corrections.

After making the system clear to students and separating our response to ideas, meaning, and content from our response to accuracy, it is time to turn to accuracy. Once students have taken on the role of "critic" and "secretary" rather than author, if we don't actually correct every error we come across, what should we do?

The third strategy is not necessarily to tackle every error, every time, but to establish priorities. When we look at a student's paper that has a lot of errors in it, we might decide to indicate only what Burt and Kiparsky (1972) call "global errors," the errors that impede our comprehension, such as sentence derailments or faulty subordination. "As a result, elementary and secondary school students have to wear a uniform is a good idea." Such sense-hampering errors cause readers more problems than so-called "local errors," things like missing *-s* or *-ed* inflections, or a wrong article. In the next sentence, "Many people who attends private schools don't come from rich families," the *-s* ending on *attend* is a local error, and not one that causes a reader serious problems. An alternative to the global-local priority is to indicate the location of types of errors that we have already discussed in class and ask the students to correct them. A teacher might correct other errors, or let them go, or make a list of error types as they occur, so that a grammar syllabus is created.

The fourth strategy is to look for and point out strengths as well as weaknesses, to give students the chance to perceive a correct model in their own use of language. Let's consider how a teacher might mark the following passage, written by Yolanda in a college-level developmental ESL class.

The way Colombian teenagers act and behave differ a lot from teenagers in the United States. In my country, young people is very respectful with the elderly. We are taught from a very early age to respect our elders. Young people in the United States, on the other hand, is very cold and independent. They don't worry about other people. They don't mind if an old woman is tired or need help; they just live their lives.

Typically, a teacher would correct or indicate the four verb errors. But how many main verbs are there? Eleven. So the student got four wrong and seven right. Why not point out the correct verbs, perhaps with a check mark above each, and ask the student to look at them and use them as models to fix the others?

We are so attuned to errors and so involved in ferreting them out that we tend to neglect to praise our students when they take a risk and try but get it wrong. Students are more likely to take risks if they see that risk-taking is noted and encouraged. So we should be on the lookout not only for what is correct but also for good attempts. Some teachers would approach the following sentence, for example, as a sentence with errors, underlining or deleting various parts and expecting the student to correct the sentence. "People who immigrate

to America, not only because they envy the plenty of substances that they can gain, but also want to melt into society and become a genuine American in the United States." But when a student in my class, Sam, wrote this, I commented: "You've done really well to try the *not only... but also* structure. It fits well here. But make sure that the two parts are parallel (ask me to explain this). Check, too, for your main subject + verb structure." When he wrote his next draft, he tried again: "It's not good for parents or children to speak only their own language, not only because it makes them lose a lot of chances to practice and learn English, but also because it makes them get the bad habit of always counting on their native people," and he added a little note to me: "How is it this time?"

The fifth strategy is to help students find ways to develop critical reading responses. One of the best strategies I've found for showing students how readers react to errors is to model the reading process for them, explaining the expectations that English-speaking readers have. I build this around the core of an English sentence, the subject + verb. If a student wrote a passage like the following, I wouldn't correct it on the student's paper. "My uncle's daughter who was going to a private school. She had to wear a uniform no matter what the weather was." If I did try to correct this, I'd have to decide whether to cross out *who* or to cross out the period and insert commas around the *who* clause, making the whole passage into one sentence. Instead, I'd write on the board: *My uncle's daughter*, then pause and ask students what they expect next. Any reader familiar with English texts will expect that to be the subject and will expect a verb. But then comes the *who* clause, and we are left waiting for the verb, with the sentence not completed. The students discuss how to make the sentence fit the reader's expectations of an independent clause consisting of a subject plus a verb. At the same time, in line with the idea of praising risk-taking, I would point out the sophisticated use of *no matter what*. With such an approach, the students begin to see an error as something that intervenes in the writer-reader relationship, something that goes against the reader's expectations, rather than a failure to live up to some abstract set of linguistic rules.

Once we have modeled the process of reading as a way to help students see what readers expect, students can be introduced to the next step in critical reading of their own work: proofreading strategies. Teachers may tell students to check their work carefully, without giving any real guidelines as to how to do that. I ask my students to practice the following four techniques:

1. The students read their papers aloud to other students. They may hesitate when a sentence doesn't seem to work, or they may read correctly what they have written incorrectly.

2. Another student reads the paper aloud. This new reader may pause when a sentence is problematic.

3. The students take a sheet of paper, cover up everything on the page except the first sentence, put their pencil point on one word at a time, and say the sentence aloud, word by word. They try to pick out the core subject + verb of the sentence.

4. The students read their last sentences first and so on, backwards through the paper, sentence by sentence. This is another way of preventing the reading eye from leaping ahead for the content; it focuses attention on sentence-level accuracy.

By practicing these four techniques, students learn to read their own writing with a critical eye.

The sixth and final strategy focuses on the sources of students' errors. To raise our students' consciousness about grammatical accuracy, we need to find ways to make error linguistically interesting and intellectually engaging. In my classes we discuss where errors come from and why students make errors. When I underline an error in a second draft, I often ask the student to correct the error and to explain where the error came from and what type of error it is. Some illustrations follow.

Françoise wrote "She gave me six advices," and after I underlined *advices*, she corrected it and explained it like this: "*Advice* is a countable noun in French and it's for this reason I made the error." We discuss in class the phenomenon of transfer, or interference, from a native language, the fact that it occurs mostly at the early stages of language learning, and that research has found that less than 25% of grammatical errors in adults' speech is due to transfer (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982, p. 103).

A greater source of error is from the application of interlanguage rules; that is, learners make generalizations about rules within the target language, in this case, English. When Martine wrote "How can this creates a problem?" she corrected it by deleting the *-s* and wrote: "I used the wrong form after *can*. I was using an *-s* on a verb in the third person (English rule!)." However we interpret her comment—as an accusation, as a plea, or just as a groan—it alerts us to a problem that many language learners have: They intelligently

apply what they think is a rule and feel frustrated when the application doesn't work. With Huey-Fen's sentence, "I did was the only one who didn't prepare gifts," a teacher's tendency would be to cross out *did* and assume the student was confused about the basic verb system. But then we hear from her: "In English we always say 'I do like you' to emphasize." After consultation she changed her sentence to "I actually was...." Imagine how confused she might be if a teacher misread her intention and just crossed out *did*.

Sometimes the rules the students are applying intelligently are ones we have just taught. In the sentence: "Chinese New Year always gives us fun and exciting," Hui-Min's explanation of the error was this: "I used wrong forms. After *gives us* have to follow nouns: *fun* and *excitement*. I thought *exciting* was a noun form because some verbs add the *-ing* form to become nouns. For example: he is getting used to living in New York. *Living* is a noun." I had just carefully reviewed the gerund form as subject and object. Here was a clear case of error arising from an intelligent application of rules taught in class, what some call teacher-induced error.

Instruction led to the error in this passage, too: "If the doctor did not tell this man about his illness; this man may feel he has not fulfilled his life with his family." Mary replaced the semicolon with a comma, saying that she had applied a rule that has just been taught. She had used the semicolon, she said, because "the period does not fit. Also the comma does not fit the words: *and, or, so, yet, but, nor, for*. The word *if* is not one of these words." Just that week, I had carefully taught the use of the comma with coordinating conjunctions, and Mary had meticulously applied what she saw as her new rule, that commas belonged exclusively with those seven coordinating conjunctions. Such generalizations signal creativity and active engagement with the new language.

Learners use a variety of communication strategies to help get their messages across. Bringing these to the learners' attention is as helpful to them as it is to teachers. The strategy of avoidance is seen in the following excerpt from a student's essay: "~~He is a lyer~~ *lier li* He doesn't tell the true." The student can't spell *liar* so replaces it with another structure, alas an incorrect one. Temasgen's sentences, "My brother's room is messy. On the contrary, my sister's room is tidy," show a memorized phrase, "on the contrary," misused in this context in place of "in contrast." And, "My reactions made them surprise" shows not just a slip, a careless omission of an inflection, but an error resulting from a language-learning strategy that we usually encourage, the use of a dictionary. Nabuko's explanation of her error went like this: "I looked up *make* in *Longman's Dictionary* and saw the

idiom *to make someone + the simple form of the verb.*" She had, of course, seen examples like: "The pain made him cry out" and "How do you make this machine work?" So here we see not simply an error, but the application of a sophisticated linguistic hypothesis.

Asking students to tell us where they think their errors come from provides us with information about their first language transfer, their application of interlanguage rules, their interpretation of our teaching, and their use of communication strategies. It also gives us useful feedback on which errors our students can recognize and which ones they can't. Roseline wrote "Referring to the article that doctors should tell their patients the truth about their condition" and explained her error as "*Condition* should be plural because I am talking about patients. I made the error because I did not read it carefully." I knew then that I had to spend more time teaching her about sentence structure. Other times, though, students can immediately correct an error, recognizing it as a genuine mistake in performance. With the sentence "I met a old American couple," Youn changed *a* to *an* and explained: "I made the error because I was unconscious."

We can learn a lot about our students' errors if we give them the chance to make them, fix them, and discuss them. In that way, errors are no longer the enemy, but clear evidence of language learning, enlightening for students and teachers alike. Errors are, indeed, as Kroll and Schafer (1978) have said, "clues to inner processes, windows into the mind" (p. 243).

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