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Reassessing the "Proofreading Trap": ESL Tutoring and Writing Instruction

by Sharon A. Myers

ESL writers present a common dilemma to writing centers—the desire for sentence-level interventions from their tutors. Our staff often experience such interventions as contradicting the aim of writing centers, formulated by Stephen North as making "sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (438). The job of writing center tutors, North stated, "is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). The sentence-level demands of ESL students, however, are seen as "editing." Eric Hobson expresses this attitude in an article about writing center pedagogy in which he complains that during the period between the late 70s and early 80s,

> writing courses dealt with writing (e.g., invention, drafting, revision, development of authors' voices, etc.) while writing center staff were allocated the demanding and ethically questionable task of "cleaning up" writers' editing skills, of eradicating minority dialects . . . and of "dealing with" non-native writers. (155-166)

It is easy to understand why, faced with cutting through the confused syntactic and lexical tangles entwined in the sentences of second-language texts, writing specialists might much prefer to discuss issues of content and organization. Giving students correct grammar or more appropriate vocabulary is perceived as "fixing" the paper, something understood to violate the autonomy of the writer and the integrity of the work's authorship.

About the Author

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As someone who has worked with ESL writers for more than fifteen years, the attitude that sentence-level errors are mechanical, relatively unimportant ephemera has always seemed problematic to me, though I have heard it expressed or implied by conscientious tutors many times. It is a good example of the professional disjunction between composition specialists and ESL specialists that Paul Matsuda has described in *College Composition and Communication*, and a good example of the need to go outside of composition studies to improve what Matsuda refers to as "institutional practices" appropriate to second-language learners. It is wrong to assume, he explains, "that ESL writing can be broken down neatly into a linguistic component and a writing component and that the linguistic problems will disappear after some additional instruction in remedial language courses" (715). I want to show, in this article, that it is indeed the "linguistic" component (vocabulary and syntax) as much or more than what is considered the "writing" (rhetorical) component that ESL students need most, and that their "errors" are persistent evidence of normal second-language learning and processing, not some failure on the part of students. Many international graduate students, in particular, usually have a good idea of what they want to say, but are often at a loss as to how to say it. That is, they may have fewer whole-essay problems than native English speaking students, but still need a great deal of support. Even in cases in which a student is producing multiple drafts, the organization of such drafts may require macro-organizing language such as "Arguments against phenomenon X depend on four assumptions," or "The perspective that informs most research on X is . . . ," or "I would like to discuss two alternatives and their implications . . . ," or other language to signal sequencing of information across a text, provide background for contrast, or announce the dimensions in which the topic will be presented (e.g., whether the writer is going to evaluate, analyze, report, or critique). The language and the writing are inseparable.

There are a number of causes underlying the frustrations felt by both ESL students and tutors in writing centers. These include the unrealistic expectations about language learning embedded in our institutional arrangements for ESL students; the historic de-emphasis of sentence pedagogies; a conception of culture which excludes the structure of languages; ethical confusion; the understanding of errors as something to be eliminated rather than as artifacts of processing (and often of developmental progress); and the failure to recognize the depth of the "sentence-level" problems involved in second-language processing.

Unrealistic Expectations

Writing is arguably the most advanced and difficult of the modes, and usually the last acquired. Even among first-language learners, relatively few achieve the ability to write good formal academic prose at the university level. While the ability to speak a given language does not necessarily predict a person's ability to write in it, it is useful to note something about the time involved in spoken second-language acquisition in order to adjust the dimensions in which we need to perceive our students' struggles. The Foreign Service Institute has estimated that a minimum level of professional speaking proficiency (entailing the ability to fluently support opinions, hypothesize, and explain complex phenomena) in a foreign language relatively remote from English may require a native English speaker 2,400 hours of intensive training under the ideal conditions provided by the Foreign Service. A superior level may entail hundreds of hours more. According to Liskin-Gasparro, attaining a superior level in a more closely related language, such as Spanish or French, is estimated to take 720 hours (qtd. in Omaggio-Hadley 26). By comparison, four semesters of foreign language classes in a U.S. university provide 200-300 hours of instruction. Assuming that these estimations of the time it takes English learners to learn to speak foreign languages at professional levels would at least approximate the time it takes for speakers of other languages to speak with the same proficiency in English, it is not realistic to expect that many ESL students will speak fluently at advanced levels. I don't believe the ability to write at advanced levels is achieved much faster or that writing center tutors should be led to believe that students should. Writing is denser than speech and in academic settings requires very high levels of reading comprehension, a formal register, sophisticated paraphrasing ability and a specialized vocabulary. Very few ESL students who walk into a writing center are likely to have such high levels of proficiency. As Williams notes, it is not realistic to believe that they "should have put their second language problems behind them and be ready to take on the challenges of the composition classroom without further support" (qtd. in Matsuda 715). Students from China and Korea, for example, may have "studied" English for as long as eleven years in their home countries, but that "study" may have consisted of rote memorization of isolated words in vocabulary lists and "grammar" tests based on discrete items conforming to "rules" whose limitations are unknown to them. Immigrant students who enter U.S. high schools may never have had their needs to understand English as a foreign language attended to adequately, given the patchwork of requirements and variable quality of ESL teacher-training programs across the states and the strong political resistance to funding the needs of bilingual students. Even now, very few TESL or

Applied Linguistics teacher preparation programs offer full courses in second-language composition. As a result, immigrant students often come into writing centers with second-language issues in addition to all the problems associated with "basic" writers in other populations.

The acquisition of a second language is a major achievement in a human life. It takes years of work. The depth and scale of the achievement are not always appreciated by U.S. writing tutors, few of whom have ever mastered any language other than their own at the level of sophistication demanded of ESL writers in academic settings, and who may actually, therefore, consider the control of agreement conventions in language, for example, a minor problem (more about agreement conventions further on).

The Historic Turn from Sentence-Level Pedagogies

In his history of "The Erasure of the Sentence" in composition studies, Robert J. Connors attributes the fall of the sentence as a focus of instruction to the strong movements away from formalism, behaviorism, and empiricism that have defined much of composition theory for the last twenty years. He laments the loss of useful sentence pedagogies as many writing specialists rejected everything about all three *isms* (or what they associated with those *isms*) with the kind of extremism unfortunately typical in education. With good reason, form was dethroned and meaning crowned. No one wants a return to the bad old days of the five-paragraph jello mold garnished with topic sentences, but like Connors, I think that ignoring the sentence, which is a central feature of writing in the texts of both native and non-native speakers, is a disservice to both populations. In the case of ESL students, whose greatest and most consistent difficulties are baldly manifested in the boundaries of the sentences itself, it seems like an eerie kind of denial.

More problematic than the historic de-emphasis of the sentence, however, is the separation of instruction in vocabulary and syntax with instruction in rhetoric. An article representative of dichotomizing sentence-level errors ("language") from "writing" in work with ESL students is "Avoiding the Proofreading Trap: The Value of the Error Correction Process" by Jane Cogie, Kim Strain, and Sharon Lorinskas published in *Writing Center Journal* (Spring/Summer, 1999). Constructing their analysis in just that framework, they interpret the persistence of the primary problems of ESL students and the persistence of the student need/demand for help with them (articulated or not) as a source of frustration and stress. Student demands for direct help in what the authors seem to consider a secondary level of writing are actually construed, as their title indicates, as a "trap" which must be "avoided" through techniques of

indirect error correction. But there is no getting away from the fact that students need control of a great deal of lexis and syntax in the first place. They need a lot of vocabulary and a lot of experience, both in comprehension and production, to get to any level where "ideas" even become comprehensible. Meaning does not flow from such knowledge and experience, but the ability to express meaning does.

Language and Culture

Jane Cogie introduces the article by noting her appreciation of Judith Power's interpretation of the role of writing center instructors as "cultural informants":

> The cultural informant role endorsed by Powers gives writing center tutors flexibility for meeting specific needs of ESL students not met by the nondirective writing center ideal. With their many cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic differences, ESL students often lack the knowledge to engage in the question and answer approach to problem-solving used in most writing centers . . . . the read-aloud method for discovering sentence-level errors, frequently productive for native speakers, provides little help to ESL students who lack the ear to hear their own errors. The value of the cultural informant role, then, is that it validates sharing information about English that these students have no way of knowing on their own. (7)

Over time, however, Cogie feels disillusioned, as "too often this role, at least when sentence-level errors were concerned, tended to translate into the tutor editing and the student observing" (7). Like Purcell, whom she cites, she wishes to "shift the focus of the ESL session from difficult-to-resist, sentence-level errors to more meaningful idea-related issues . . ." (8). Cogie describes a tutor who felt that in her role as "cultural informant," she was merely editing, giving the student her "language," but not her "ideas" (8). But just as instruction in vocabulary and syntax ("language") cannot be separated from instruction in rhetoric ("writing"), language and culture are inseparable.

Writing instructors are indeed cultural informants. Culture refers not only to the contours of personal space, the educational roles of teacher and student, the sense of time, the politeness conventions and the discourse conventions of a given group, but to language and its forms. Culture includes the way that a given language determines, subordinates, complements, coordinates, pluralizes, counts, modalizes, interrogates, lexicalizes. In fact, the greatest problem many ESL writers have is in controlling the syntax and lexis of the English language. By "lexis," I mean not only words—what we

usually think of as "vocabulary"—but multi-word units such as "in some ways," "on either side of," phrases such as "make arrangements for," and frequently co-occurring words such as "highly significant" or "closely linked." If we want to help non-English speakers write in English, we need to acknowledge the central role of language in writing—including all the redundant syntactic forms needed for "ideas" to take shape. Writing instructors and tutors schooled in modern composition theory, well aware of the failings and absurdities of traditional writing instruction reifying form over content, are wary of reducing the concept of writing to "good grammar." But what "English grammar" means to a native speaker of English, even one who grows up with a dialect of English unused in formal instruction, is very different from what it means to a second-language learner. The need to learn the many complex ways a language determines, subordinates, coordinates, lexicalizes and so on are often demeaned in composition literature, pooh-poohed as mere "sentence-level grammar" resulting in "sentence-level errors." These language structures should not be somehow divorced from culture or our roles as cultural informants. Errors in vocabulary and syntax occur within the structural constraints of a language and constitute "culture" just as much as every other feature of language below (phonetic) or above (rhetorical) the sentence level. Enabling the members of a different culture to express themselves in a new culture is work that cultural informants do. Being a culture informant includes being a language informant.

Ethical Perspectives: Writing Process and Language Learning Process

One concern of writing tutors is expressed in the area of Cogie et al.'s article subtitled "Ethical Rationale" (9). The authors cite an example in which a writing tutor (Kate Gadbow) "helps a Japanese M.A. student more than she intends" on a master's thesis (9). After graduating, the student interviewed for U.S. jobs and was rejected. As a result, Gadbow believes, the student had to relinquish her "career goals" and go back to Japan. Gadbow reports that her student "was harmed by her focus as a tutor on helping her to graduate rather than on helping her become more proficient in English" (10). Cogie then comments: "Certainly not all ESL sessions that fail to promote independence in the writer have such momentous consequences" (10). It may not be the case that Gadbow's editing role resulted in the student's failure to find work in the U.S. An alternative explanation could be that the student failed on the basis of her oral proficiency and/or listening comprehension, rather than her writing. In any case, second-language learners are inevitably dependent on people who know how to speak and write the second language, in order to learn how to speak and write it themselves.

The learning takes a very long time and very, very many engagements with the language, not just a series of sessions with a writing tutor. In fact, the tutor may have provided much of the input the student will finally need to make particular vocabulary or structures available for spontaneous production at a later date when the student's growing and changing inner version of the language (often characterized as "interlanguage") is ready to absorb them.

While I would interpret the case of the Japanese student differently than Gadbow, fear is understandable in tutors who believe that such consequences might be possible if, according to their best lights, they "fail to promote independence" in the ESL writers they work with. But what does independence mean? Learning is slow and occurs through processes neither entirely understood or under the control of either the tutor or the learner. It is frustrating for ESL students to have a native informant of the language resist informing them, particularly one who is employed, ostensibly, to pay attention to their language and help them write. And not only resist, but suggest through this resistance (even though it may not be intended) that it is somehow dishonest or lazy to expect the tutors to do so. This resistance is confusing, but most second-language learners are insecure about their language learning themselves and not in a position to question their tutors' methods.

If an ESL student's text is corrected by a tutor who flags an error and then offers alternatives, the fact that the student returns on another day and makes the same mistake is not evidence that the student is irresponsible nor is it irresponsible of the tutor to correct it again. Some features of language are learned before others. Students are not uniformly ready at all times to internalize everything pointed out to them, and much of language acquisition—that is, language that is internalized and available for production, takes place at an unconscious level. There are far too many things to remember to hold everything in conscious memory. Moreover, although we don't understand exactly how they work, there is substantial evidence for the existence of developmental patterns in second-language learning, which may well supercede the dictates of formal instruction (see Rod Ellis's *Study of Second Language Acquisition*). It is also important to keep in mind that students may require many exposures to words or patterns, and perhaps multiple communicative engagements with them as well, before they are internalized. Repeating a correction is not a capitulation to some stubborn student trait; it is simply acknowledging the real nature of what is a genuinely long and messy process. It may appear to the tutor that the student is passive, that is, not "responding to instruction," but the student is not necessarily passive at all. A great deal of language learning is receptive. Nor can the student necessarily fully learn

features of the language in the time dimension in which the tutor is teaching. Checking writing samples across periods of six months or a year may show improvement barely noticeable over a thirteen week semester -- and some language features and levels of fluency do take years, not months, to achieve. This or that exposure to some language feature may be just one or two frames in the time-lapse movie in which the human brain captures the unfolding contours of a foreign language. The students can't be rushed into an exclusive focus on the issues of mature language use we have come to consider the "writing process." Some of the ethical tension writing tutors experience also seems to be a result of underestimating how much idiosyncrasy is embodied in every human language.

Treatment of "Error"

Cogie et al.'s article is intended to provide student "tutors and their trainers a collection of practical strategies for developing bit by bit the error awareness ESL students need to self-edit" (10). In fact, students are very often painfully aware of their errors, but are not sure or simply do not know how to fix them. I don't think tutors need to spend a lot of time to develop "strategies" to increase the students' (already sometimes paralyzing) awareness of their errors, or that doing so necessarily enables students to self-edit. (To give Cogie credit, she does appreciate the importance, in the affective domain, of assessing a student's proficiency and level of confidence, and advises restraint accordingly.) Most student "errors" however, are lexical, and if they don't have the appropriate word or lexical phrase, no editing will provide it. A great many tangles in "syntax" are a result of circumlocutions—vocabulary problems, not grammar problems. While I agree that there is a place for helping students self-edit, insofar as they can, I think that so much focus on errors is only helpful in proportional relation to the students' proficiency (the lower the proficiency, the less useful it is) and that for any level of proficiency it is not as important as learning more and more language in the first place. Accuracy, as Michael Lewis has often pointed out (*The Lexical Approach*, 164-172), is the last thing any second-language learner ever acquires, and then it is relative. I don't find any shame in directly helping students identify what is not working, but even then, that is only a small part of what they need and what we can provide, which is a repertoire of things that do work. They are not engaged merely in "editing" but in learning a new language.

Before discussing other ways we might help ESL students with "sentence-level" problems, I would like to consider the four suggestions offered by Cogie et al.: using a learner's dictionary, minimal marking, error logs, and self-editing checklists. They

write that their rationale is to provide, in the absence of "native-speaker-like-intuitions," these "'more mechanical proofreading strategies' Muriel Harris and Tony Silva suggest are 'necessary'" (9). What Harris and Silva actually wrote, however, was "Therefore, some recourse to more mechanical rule-based proofreading strategies *or to outside help, such as a native speaker reader, will probably be necessary*" (535, emphases mine). Comments on the four strategies Cogie et al. suggest follow:

Learner's dictionaries. The use of learner's dictionaries (see Appendix) is the least controversial of Cogie et al.'s suggestions. Such dictionaries are aimed at the needs of non-native speakers. They use phonetic spellings and information about how to stress lexical items such as compounds and idioms. They also provide a great deal of lexical grammatical information, such as the countability or non-countability of nouns and the gradability of adjectives. They may have a limited vocabulary for definitions so that learners don't have to continually look up new words. Kim Strain points out to a student that a learner's dictionary can provide information, for example, about what verbs are transitive or intransitive (16-17). The dictionary can indeed be useful if the student knows that a violation of the verb's transitiveness or intransitiveness has occurred. If this is pointed out, then the student can look to the dictionary for some examples. If it is not, then the only way a student could "edit" his or her paper would be to look up every single verb. Strain writes that the student may need "a firmer sense of the grammatical pattern for transitive and intransitive verbs." But there is no "grammatical pattern" to get a sense of. You just have to know what verbs are transitive and what verbs are not. There is no rule establishing this pattern.

Minimal Marking. Minimal marking (in this case, two checks by a text line with two errors and one check by a line with one error) doesn't seem very helpful. It tells the student, "There are two errors here." What kind of errors? Nouns? Verbs? If verbs, is it a problem with tense? Aspect? Person? Valency (patterns of transitivity)? Agreement? Register (formal/informal)? Mode (a spoken rather than written form)? Are my errors concerned with articles? Pronouns? Word order? Lexical choice? The possibilities for a non-native speaker are a veritable black hole. I think we owe it to the student to at least identify the nature of errors and not just to enumerate them. Whose independence does this minimal marking really support? Richard Haswell's minimal marking scheme (which Cogie et al. cite) is intended for "regular freshman composition sections" (603). Such sections are primarily made up of native speakers of English. Haswell proposes that "[b]ecause the teacher responds to a surface mistake only with a check in the margin, attention can be maintained on more substantial problems" (601). But what may be a minor problem for a native speaker can be a sub-

stantial problem indeed for a second language student. One rationale he gives for this minimal marking is that "[i]t shows the student that the teacher initially assumed that carelessness and not stupidity was the source of the error" (601). However, this rationale does not necessarily apply to the errors of non-native speakers either quantitatively or qualitatively, as it is not carelessness that accounts for most of their problems.

Error log bogs. The value of error logs may be the most questionable of all Cogie et al.'s recommendations because, given the extremely long time it takes to learn a language, the cost/benefit ratio seems much more likely to be enhanced by spending more time learning more language (meaning more words and lexical phrases) than on the study of errors. The number of times a student is asked to have recourse to a dictionary, for example, has to be embedded in a realistic estimate of how many times it will actually be useful and at what point the student will become so frequently and hopelessly distracted from the flow of the text that he or she just chucks it. Time estimates have to be based on how much time the student has to spend on a piece of writing in the context of everything else the student has to do, and not only on the time available for individual instruction in the writing center. Sometimes it is simply more economical to point out an error and supply a correction or an alternative way to express something. A lexical notebook, such as those proposed by Michael Lewis (*Implementing* 75-85), would probably be more valuable than an error log and more likely to be referred to in the future. Lewis recommends having students keep notebooks of collocations such as "population increase/decrease"; polywords such as "in accordance with"; and phrasal verbs such as "look up to," that are clustered around themes and topics of importance to each student. If there is no time, the same thing can be done verbally, with the student repeating examples from a dictionary or examples supplied by the tutor. There is substantial evidence that phonological memory influences both grammar and vocabulary acquisition (see Nick C. Ellis).

I refer to error log "bogs" because I think it is easy to get bogged down in spending time and attention to the nature and analysis of wrong use of language when that time and attention could be employed in the service of learning correct use that eliminates errors in a much more productive way. Most learner errors are quite predictable, without the need for logs of them. They are either lexical, in which case they are tied to word idiosyncrasies and not amenable to "sentence-level" grammar anyway, or predictable in the sense that they are the same errors all second-language learners make while they are learning English. A great deal of variation is predictable on the basis of first languages, described in *Learner English: A Teacher's Guide to Interference and Other Problems* by Michael Swan and Bernard Smith, who list and discuss the sources of common

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problems typical of English learners from nineteen different language groups. Students who come from languages that do not have articles, for example, strongly tend to omit articles; students whose first languages have articles tend to use them too much in English. Writing down "missing definite article" under a column labeled "Name/Description of Error" could get pretty redundant for Korean students, for example. There are so many dimensions of article use that govern whether or not an article belongs in front of a given noun in a given context that simply putting it in front of the noun in the "Correction" column, even in the context of a phrase, is not always guaranteed to elucidate anything for the student except that he or she should have used it in that place in that sentence in the context of that paper. Why not just correct it in the paper in the first place?

Very often, not having the English necessary to express something, students simply translate directly from their mother tongues. Filling up an error log with all the infelicities this produces does not address the cause of the error, which is simply lack of the language needed in the first place. Such "errors" cannot be reverse engineered in an error log.

Self-editing checklists. The authors propose self-editing checklists, handouts given to students which ask them to record their three most frequent errors (to check against their current paper) and to check all verbs for subject-verb agreement, modals, tenses, and voice (all extremely complicated phenomena from a second-language perspective). While I am skeptical of such checklists for the same reasons I question the value of error logs, I think there may be a place for self-editing checklists for very advanced students, but only for certain problems which can be simply defined and identified. One that comes to mind is the comma splice. A list of example comma splices which have appeared in the student's own texts, matched by a corresponding repair might be useful to list, contributing to the sense of what comma splices look and "sound" (read) like. Probably the most useful suggestion on the checklist provided by the authors is the final one, which advises the ESL student to "ask a knowledgeable friend to read over your paper and look for problem areas" (22). The authors note that this should be a friend outside of the writing center. I would note that that such friends would be very likely to provide the vocabulary and grammar correction that the tutors in the writing center are not comfortable providing.

Looking Below the "Surface" of The Sentence

The major question for writing instructors and for tutors is always, first of all, where to begin on ESL papers full of errors in syntax and vocabulary. The authors advise dis-

tinguishing between "local errors" and "global errors," a distinction which usually refers to prioritizing errors that obscure meaning (global errors) over "errors that do not significantly hinder communication of a sentence's message (local errors)" (Hendrickson 360). This is a useful distinction and a legitimate instructional strategy, but the distinction cannot be made mechanically through an a priori definition of errors, such as "Global errors include incorrect verb tense, verb incorrectly formed, incorrect use or formation of a modal . . . awkward word order . . . ," and so on (Cogie et al. 15), while "Local errors include incorrect subject-verb agreement, incorrect or missing article, problem with the singular or plural of a noun, wrong word choice . . ." (Cogie et al. 16). Whether or not an error is global or local depends first and foremost on its context. "Awkward word order" in the sentence of a given text does not necessarily interfere with meaning at all; it may be, simply, awkward. On the other hand, the distinction between singular and plural in a noun phrase could very much affect meaning, and "wrong word" choices probably obscure meaning more than any other single mistake. Rather than refer to these arbitrary and misleading categories, a tutor would be better advised to simply ask herself or himself, during the reading of a text, what, if anything, most confuses meaning here? Or, what, if anything, makes the meaning most difficult to process, even if it is recoverable? In some contexts, it may indeed be even the misuse or omission of a single definite or indefinite article.

Related to these distinctions is the practice of waving away what native speaking tutors or instructors define as "local" or "surface" errors, "minor irritants" that the students should be able to clear up relatively easily. In reality these errors often reflect extremely complex problems for second-language learners. Subject-verb agreement often falls into this category. Isn't it strange how, despite all the times they are shown and told, the students, even very advanced ones, just keep failing to make their subjects and verbs agree? It appears to be so simple.

The belief that it is simple is an instance of what Paul Westney points out as instructor (not student) error in teaching pedagogical "rules," which is the assumption that because they look simple to us, they are simple to a non-native speaker (80-83). Subject-verb agreement is a difficult feature of English. First of all, the student has to know whether a given noun is countable in order to make it agree with a verb. The "countable/non-countable" distinction made of English nouns is bizarre to students whose languages do not contain it. A furniture is a furniture is a furniture. On what basis is the student supposed to be able to figure out that it is not? Again, it is lexical, something particular to a word, not "sentence-level" grammar that determines what to do. There is nothing about words that flags their countability, and the semantic con-

cept is so alien it is hard to remember even if the countability of a particular noun has been brought to the student's attention on some other occasion. In addition to this pitfall, the tricky English anachronism of the third person "s" lies in wait to ambush subject-verb agreement in the sentences of even the most advanced students. On one level, the third person "s" is probably hard to keep in memory precisely because it doesn't affect meaning very much; it is a redundant feature, since the noun clause has already declared its identity and number. Meaning has already been established, so there is no strong semantic demand for the information, only the abstract grammatical convention of repeating it. This is not natural or obvious to non-native speakers at all, nor is it easy to keep in mind. Compounding the problem of subject-verb agreement are both the phonological and orthographic properties of the "s" inflection. The "s" is often deemphasized in the speech of natives, from whom students get much of their input. Because it is deemphasized, it is often not heard, and as a result, not imitated. If students tend to drop it in speech, they tend to drop it in writing. The 's' inflection is realized in three different morphemes: /s/, /z/, and /ez/. These have to be rendered as "s" or "es" in writing independent of their pronunciation, and are sometimes confounded with the apostrophed "s" and "es" forms of the possessive incarnation of the "s" inflection. Unless, of course, the noun takes an irregular plural. This is a feature of individual nouns, and not a rule-governed phenomenon. Compound nouns, too, are a real minefield for non-native speakers trying to produce agreement. Zalewki illustrates the difficulties with compound nouns by noting that sometimes there is no formal singular or plural distinction at all, as in the word "Japanese" in an example where a writer explains that Americans shrug to express "I don't know," followed by the sentence, "On the other hand, Japanese shakes the head from side to side" (695). The ambiguity of this and other problems in number and person, she writes, "constitute a serious textual breakdown not only because trying to solve them costs the reader a lot of processing effort but also because ultimately their disambiguation turns out to be impossible" (697). Such problems, she writes, "have all too often been viewed as *local* and thus de-emphasized in form-focused instruction" (697, emphasis added).

As for "incorrect or missing articles," insofar as they embody anaphoric relations (those which refer back to previous discourse), their significance (and therefore the choice of whether or how to use them) can span across hundreds of pages or years of shared knowledge; their use is not at all confined to the insides of sentences or to the local demands of a noun phrase. Using "a" in front of the word "experiment," for example, may obscure the fact that the writer is referring to the one known to the

addressee and the writer, which was described six pages ago. Another one of Zalewski's student texts illustrates extrasentential links expressed by articles at the paragraph level. The student is writing about arranged marriages (notes in italics are mine):

> There is a go-between who take care of between a boy and a girl. Before they meet, they can get personal histories of each other. Then, a go between (*In native discourse the "a" here would be "the" since the go-between has already been introduced in the previous sentence*) gives them a meeting. In a meeting (*again, this would be "the," because the meeting has already been mentioned*), a go-between (*should be "the," previous mention*) introduces a boy and a girl (*as before, previous mention: should be "the boy" and "the girl"*) to each other. In almost case, meetings are dinner parties. Their parents often go with them to a meeting (*the meeting previously described, not just any meeting: should be "the" meeting*). (694)

These are not sentence-level links. Importantly, they are also errors which seriously hamper the ability of a reader to process meaning.

I mention each of these different issues concerning subject-verb agreement and definite/indefinite articles to illustrate how deeply complex they are for non-native speakers. And they represent only two features of syntax that are often misconstrued as merely "surface" or "local." In fact, both connect to very large regions of language structure and use.

Teaching Language Versus Documenting Errors

I think it is both possible and desirable for writing center staff to fill the role of "foreign/second-language teachers" as well as writing instructors. In fact, writing tutors are perfectly positioned to facilitate the language learning these students need in order to develop their ability to write in English. The central insight in foreign language pedagogy in the last thirty years is that, in fact, language acquisition emerges from learners wrestling with meaning in acts of communicating or trying to communicate. That is exactly what ESL students are doing in writing centers, person to person.

What needs to occur is a shift in emphasis from carving up whatever language the students have managed to summon up for their texts and then asking them to autopsy it, to giving the students more and more language from which to make choices, establishing more and more links for them from the language they have to new language they need. Facilitating learning by providing correct language input rather than focusing on incorrect language can be done in a principled way, informed by insights into writing

processes staff already have, but conditioned by an understanding of language-acquisition processes that are no less real or important, such as the time dimension in which acquisition takes place and the many layers of complexity learners face such as those illustrated above.

Writing tutors need to acknowledge and respond to the central role of lexis in language learning. They should also be equipped with much better knowledge of the pedagogical grammar of English as a second/foreign language. It is not the same grammar used to teach native speakers. Rather than just pointing out an error, tutors can provide alternative language: "Another way to say that is . . ."; "One way of putting it is . . ."; "Some other phrases you can use are . . . ." Much of writing (and much of speech, for that matter) consists of stringing together lexical phrases, not filling in grammatical slots. We use, and learn, much of language in words and word "chunks," not in abstract rules (Nick C.Ellis; Kirsner; Lewis; Little; Nattinger and DeCarrico; Tschirner). Language can be given verbally (asking the student to repeat), dictated with the student taking it down in writing, or offered through the use of a collocation dictionary (see Appendix). In some contexts, a lexical notebook might be appropriate; in another, just inserting a correction directly into the student's text as a reformulation might be the best course of action (see Myers for one version of using reformulation as composition feedback).

Modern corpus linguistics and discourse analysis provide interesting language frames that can be used to help writers. Nattinger and DeCarrico, for example, advocate acquainting students with written discourse forms at both global and sentence levels. In formal essays, for example, these frames include lexical phrases for topic nomination such as "[T]he goal of this paper is to . . ."; phrases for agreement and disagreement ("X does not support Y . . ."); or contrast (". . . is unlike . . . with respect to. . .") (172). Learning sentence heads (such as "It is possible that . . . ," or "The research suggests that . . . ") enrich the writing repertoire, as do frames, such as "Evidence of . . . indicates . . . ," or "One interpretation of . . . is . . . ," or "An alternative interpretation is . . . ."

Reporting verbs (e.g., suggest, imply, point out, note) are used much more in writing than in speech, and can be presented to students as alternatives in sentence-level contexts. Consciousness-raising exercises can be advised, such as suggesting that a student note reporting verbs they find when they read English text outside of the writing center. Subordination and coordination, the bane of ESL students, can be practiced in sentence combining exercises such as those popular in the 1970s and 80s (de Beaugrande; Broadhead; Strong).

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Much of the language students need is writing-specific, and the writing center is an ideal place to give it to them. Most of all, showing is better than telling: "Here are some examples of acceptable student essays written by students in your field," or "Here are some examples of acceptable texts written by students who have been given assignments similar to yours." With the permission of student writers, writing centers could have files of such examples. Students need to get a sense of what such texts look like and "sound" like. This would be especially useful to international students, who are often even less familiar with what they are expected to produce than are the U.S. students.

Grammar instruction needs to be based on a principled examination of what is genuinely teachable and learnable, not just shunted off to traditional reference grammars based on Latin language paradigms aimed at native speakers that so many writing specialists just assume are useful (see Appendix for a recommendation). Tutors need to relinquish the attitude that giving second-language students the language they need is "unethical" or "immoral." Filling in an article somewhere it is needed and pointing out the context is one drop in the waves of the language ocean carving out its shape on the shoreline of the student's memory. One drop, or even fifteen, are not all that significant. Likewise, repeating some words or other instruction is not a sign of pathological student "dependence." Repetition plays an important role in language learning. Nor should native English speaking students be used as models in designing instruction for ESL students.

I am well aware that there are students who would be happy to let writing tutors do all their work for them; that there are students who are lazy or manipulative or both. Members of this minority show up regularly in my classes, and while I give everybody the benefit of the doubt to begin with, it doesn't take very long to identify them. Tutors who have multiple sessions with such students soon identify them, too. I just flatly tell these students that they need to go home and work on the text more before I will be willing to help them with it, or I point out a few "global" errors and note that it is sloppy in regard to X, Y, and Z, too, and to come back after they have paid more attention to it. But most students, especially ESL students, genuinely want to learn and are willing to work hard. I think we owe second-language students second-language writing instruction more broadly conceived than error documentation. There is indeed a "trap." It is created by the contradictions between what ESL learners need and are capable of and what an uninformed perspective leads us to suppose they need and are capable of. Nancy Grimm's admonition in regard to students with different backgrounds (in her example, an African American student and a young woman from a

conservative Christian background) could apply as well to ESL students who enter the writing center:

> When the proofreading issue is contextualized within an ideological model of literacy, it becomes...complicated. Rather than refusing to engage in this task because individual writers are supposed to be able to do it for themselves, writing centers need more complex understandings of the issues involved. (20)

A much more relaxed attitude about "error," one reflecting an appreciation of second language acquisition processes, and better training in the pedagogical grammar of English as a second language would go a long way toward preventing either students or tutors from feeling frustrated or "trapped" in any part of the tutoring process.

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APPENDIX: RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Learner Dictionaries

Collins Cobuild learners' dictionaries are good references and can be found on the Cobuild website: <http://www.cobuild.collins.co.uk/>. They provide information about whether a verb takes a gerund and/or an infinitive, for example, and about how common or uncommon a word is (information much appreciated by students who do not want to sound old-fashioned or weird). They are based on a corpus of over 250 million words taken, not from traditional definitions and examples, but from real-world speech and writing. Word pragmatics are noted, explaining word function (advising or agreeing, for example). Discourse organizing functions are noted, along with attitudes the words express, or whether they are used for emphasis. Style is described (American or British, rude, journalistic, literary, technical, spoken or written, technical, formal or informal), and authentic examples are given in complete sentences. All nouns are identified as count or non-count, and adjectives as graded or not and how (that is, inflected for comparison, as in "slow, slower, slowest"). Verbs that only occur in the passive voice are noted, and transitive and intransitive verbs are noted as is information, for example, about whether an intransitive verb is followed by a prepositional phrase or by a specified adverb. Patterns in the use of titles are given, as well as the patterns in which number and other word classes are expressed. Such an advanced learner's dictionary is also a good reference for tutors, who need to learn "word grammar" themselves, or at least know where to find it if they are not familiar with the pedagogical grammar of English as a foreign language. The advanced learner's dictionary is now on CD-ROM with a thesaurus, grammar information, and a five million word wordbank for examples.

An online dictionary much favored by my ESL university students is *Wordsmyth*: <http://www.wordsmyth.net/>. Examples of how English expresses things, whether found in a dictionary or provided by a native speaker, are the most useful. The students need to learn the right way to use the language to express their meanings, not just how to recognize (in the cases where recognition is even possible) that they have used some word or expression in the wrong way.

Collocation Dictionaries

Another good resource for ESL writers is the *Dictionary of Selected Collocations* edited by Jimmie Hill and Michael Lewis. This is a resource enabling students to learn what is often of most use to them as writers: what words go with what words. This collocation dictionary is based on contemporary work in corpus linguistics. Our ability to analyze the patterns of language has been boosted many orders of magnitude over traditional analyses by the use of computers, and it is only recently that these findings are emerging into dictionaries and grammars. The collocation dictionary does not define words, but gives students prob-

able combinations based on frequency studies of huge corpora of authentic written and spoken language. This book is of great value to second language students. Entries are given on the categories of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (mostly nouns). For example, if a student is writing about a career, the dictionary provides a list of words and phrases which most commonly cluster around that word, including a list of verbs that come before the noun, a list (in the most common tense) of which come after it, and a list of adjectives and phrases which contain the noun. Here is their example entry (11) ("sb" is an abbreviation for "subject"):

CAREER

V: abandon, be absorbed in, be destined for ~ in, boost, carve out, change, choose, concentrate on, cripple, cut short, damage, determine, develop, devote oneself to, embark on, end, enter upon, further, give up, hamper, have a ~ in (banking), help, hinder, interrupt, launch out on, launch sb on , map out, plan, predict, promote, pursue, put an end to, ruin, sacrifice, salvage, set sb on, spoil, start, take up, wreck ~

V: ~blossomed, had its ups and downs

A: amazing, brilliant, chequered, colourful, demanding, difficult, disappointing, distinguished, entire, fine, flourishing, glittering, golden, good, great, honourable, ill-fated, meteoric, modest, promising, splendid, steady, strange, successful, turbulent, unusual, varied ~

P: outset of, peak of, pinnacle of, springboard for, summit of ~, a ~ change

In a different example, starting from a verb or adjective, the student would find, after the word "convinced": "absolutely, almost, easily, half-, more or less, not altogether, not entirely, practically, totally _convinced_ about/of..." (230).

Another useful reference for collocations is the Collins Cobuild English Collocations on CD-ROM, available through the same website of the Cobuild dictionaries noted above.

Grammar reference

A good modern resource grammar for tutors is the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* by Douglas Biber et al. Unlike descriptions in traditional grammars, those in the *Longman Grammar* are based entirely on empirical data.

defined terms in writing instruction is occasionally advocated by instructors like Dave Waddell, who. notes that first-year composition students asked to define â€œgoodâ€ writing on their first day of class. employ terms like â€œflowing.â€Â Myers, Sharon A. â€œReassessing the â€˜Proofreading Trapâ€™: ESL Tutoring and Writing Center Instruction.â€ The Writing Center Journal 24.1 (2003): 51-70. Newkirk, Thomas.