We have all written papers for some courses to be checked and graded by our instructors. We know very well that a paper that is returned with red markings and notes all over is quite discouraging for the writer. Knowing this, while giving feedback we may of course use pink pens and put smiling faces here and there on the paper but still we see the light in the students’ eye fading. If our aim is to win the student instead of discouraging him, we should be looking for ways of giving feedback without losing the student.

The most important aspect while giving feedback is adopting a positive attitude to student writing. While marking mechanically we may not realize that we are showing the student only his mistakes – negative points. If the student receives only negative feedback, he may easily be discouraged from trying to form complex structures and using new vocabulary. However, feedback sessions can be a beneficial experience for the student if the teacher shows the strong points as well.

Another important point to consider while giving feedback is the amount of correction on the end product. In academic writing, the end product is expected to have:

- A wide range of vocabulary
- Correct grammar
- Meaningful punctuation
- Accurate spelling
- Varied sentence structures
- Unity and coherence in ideas
- Well-supported and explained major points.

If the teacher tries to make comments and corrections on the final version of the student paper, the teacher would be exhausted and the student would be discouraged. One alternative can be giving feedback through the process of writing. That is, while the student is planning and organizing his ideas, the teacher can comment on the unity and coherence of ideas. Or while the student is writing his draft, the teacher can proofread for word-order, subject-verb agreement, spelling mistakes. This gradual checking can minimize the exhaustive red marks on the student paper. Another advantage of such correction is that the student sees these comments when the writing experience is still fresh in his mind. For more information, see Process Writing.

Another strategy for decreasing teacher writing on a student paper is to use some kind of “code”. This list of symbols which show typical mistakes can be found in writing guides such as APA or MLA or the teacher can come up with one like this:
CORRECTING AND GIVING FEEDBACK TO WRITING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WF</td>
<td>Wrong form</td>
<td>The strong(^{WF}) of Hercules amazed the spectators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WT</td>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>I knew(^{WT}) him for years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp</td>
<td>Wrong spelling</td>
<td>Separate(^{Sp})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For such a code to be useful for the students, they should be familiar with it beforehand. If you think photocopying would not be enough, you could post an enlarged version on the wall of the class as well. Seeing the common mistakes on the wall may also reduce the number of student mistakes.

Providing constructive feedback to the student, using a special code for proofreading, and editing a student paper through planning and drafting stages are some suggested ways for correcting and giving feedback to student writing.

Some ideas on error correction in ELT

Errors that interfere with meaning
- Verb tense
- Word order
- Confusing word choice
- Confusing spelling

Errors that are less likely to interfere with meaning
- Article mistakes
- Preposition mistakes
- Pronoun agreement
- Comma splices
- Minor spelling mistakes

The top ten ESL errors
1. Articles: persistent mistake by Turkish learners
2. Prepositions: persistent mistake by Turkish learners
3. Infinitives: which verbs take the infinitive
4. Using wrong parts of speech: nouns/adverbs/adjectives
5. Agreement: subject-verb, pronoun, tense
6. Verb tense and forms: choosing the proper tense and form
7. Active and passive voices
8. Sentences structure: fragments, run-ons, convoluted sentences
9. Punctuation: absence of punctuation or transfer from the L1
10. Style: only developed with experience in the target language
Some ideas on error correction in ELT

1. Distinguishing between serious and minor errors may be a good guide in choosing what to correct.

2. You should prioritize what you are correcting and grading. Do not focus only on grammar because students start to think that grammar is the only thing that counts in writing. Most teachers react primarily to surface errors, treating the composition as if it is a “series of separate sentences or even clauses, rather than as a whole unit of discourse” (Zamel, 1985: p.86)

3. It is a good idea to distinguish between writers who have tried and who have not. Presentation, obvious spelling, punctuation, and capitalization mistakes may be there because the student did not bother to edit and proofread her own paper. Ask the student to edit it before you check the assignment.

4. Lower level learners particularly will have trouble with finding the appropriate word and they need more modeling. Provide correct vocabulary choices. Most of the time word choice is idiomatic or conventionally agreed upon and it is difficult for the learners to come up with the correct or appropriate word even if they consult the dictionary.

5. When correcting prepositions, a very common error in the writing of Turkish learners of English, it is a good idea to provide the correct preposition if it is introduced the first time. For recurrent errors, indicating wrong preposition use and expecting the learners to self-correct would be a good idea.

6. Teachers should use consistent and standardized methods to indicate to their students the type and place of errors. Correction legends, lists of symbols often prove useful if the teacher first trains her students on their meaning and what is expected from the students when a certain symbol is used.

7. Written comments on content should be consistent. Teachers must use a set of clear and direct comments and questions, and also should familiarize students with these comments. These comments must address the strategies required to improve the essay and not just indicate what the teacher found lacking or interesting. It has been reported that without training, students just tend to ignore written comments on their essays.

8. Lower level learners have been found to benefit from more direct correction rather than indirect correction in which symbols are used or the place of error has been indicated. Another thing that has to
be kept in mind in teaching beginning level students is, because the students are struggling with both linguistic structure and writing conventions, the teacher has to stress different things at different times. When the learners are making so many mistakes, it may be futile for the teacher to try to correct every error on the paper: it will be a waste of both time and effort for the teacher and very discouraging and unmanageable for the student. Sometimes the teacher should wait for the students to reach some fluency, then stress correctness.

9. It has been found that students who receive feedback and self-correct their mistakes during revision are more likely to develop their linguistic competence than those who receive no feedback and those who are not asked to do re-writes. Therefore, revision in the form of re-writes is a must if we want any improvement.

10. Conferencing is a particularly useful technique to show the learners the errors in their papers. Students can directly ask the teacher questions on the issues they have trouble with. At the same time the teacher may check the students’ meaning and understanding.

References

Bibliography


