

## Correction – Part 3

### A question of correction

Before you read **A question of correction**, consider the following questions:

When students write journals, how should the teacher respond? With comments only, or with comments and corrections? What do you think students would think of this?

If you use correction symbols when correcting written work, do you use the same one with beginners and advanced students? Why?

Now read **A Question of Correction** and see how the authors answer both questions.

## A question of correction

*by Kathy Cox and Justine Eyre*

Kathy Cox and Justine Eyre report on the satisfying conclusion to a staffroom debate about student journals.

Increasing numbers of teachers ask students of all levels to keep a journal or diary as part of their course. Staff and students recognize that some form of personal writing helps them make sense of their new experiences, both linguistic and social (in our case, in Australia). M Carroll states that 'the practice of regular reflective writing (is) in itself a powerful language learning activity.'

Our college accepts the value of journal writing by students, but a staffroom debate arose regarding the marking of these journals. There were two very opposing viewpoints, both about the best way to correct students' personal writing, and then questioning whether it was actually appropriate to correct at all.

In the ensuing discussion we established that the content of student diaries varied from the mundane ('today I went shopping') to quite personal observations and feelings ('I feel very lonely and I want to go home'). Sometimes a teacher is addressed directly with requests for general information ('What are some good night clubs in Sydney?') or with a grammar or vocabulary problem ('Which is correct – in my home or at my home?'). Diaries are also places where students tend to express grievances about a certain lesson ('It was boring'), or a teacher ('He was unkind'), or anything else that may be bothering them. Teachers have also seen poetry, favourite song lyrics, observations of society, and recipes.

The debate

One group of teachers felt very strongly that students desired correction (not merely comment as some teachers provided) in relation to students' journal writing. The other group felt equally strongly that correcting personal writing was completely inappropriate.

Assuming that correction was desirable, there was no consensus as to the type of correction to be used. Our college uses a two-stage correction code which allows students to do their own corrections based on signals that the teacher has provided on the text, but not all teachers were applying this method. Some wrote corrections over the text or added lexical or grammatical corrections to the text.

There were two main reasons why any sort of correction was felt to be questionable.

- **Appropriacy** Firstly, it is not always an appropriate response to the subject matter. When you read, for example, 'My mother died one year previous, I'm very miss her', verb agreement seems trivial in comparison with the content. A response that signals understanding plus some advice to a statement such as 'Yesterday strange man follow me and try to make a friend with me' is perhaps more relevant than pointing out missing articles and tense problems.
- **Teacher assumptions** The second reason why traditional error correction is not suitable for personal writing is because it requires the teacher to make assumptions about intended

meaning. With an entry such as, 'I love harmony nature view as we can see a beach', where do you start?

The debate raged on. One teacher made a telling point. If teachers correct mistakes according to their own interpretation of the writing, there is a presumption of the student's intended meaning. By editing the work, teachers are dictating their own world view to students. Doesn't this negate the value of a diary or journal as a vehicle for self-expression?

#### Student feedback

Well, as sensible teachers do, we made a decision to take the question to the people concerned, ie the students themselves. The results were surprising to most of us. All the classes desired error correction of some kind within their diaries. The students felt that it was the primary reason for bothering to hand it in to teachers.

Given this feedback, we had to decide on an appropriate correction system. With one upper-intermediate class, we demonstrated two different methods for correcting the same mistake. With the error 'furnitures', the first way was to simply cross out the 's', thereby 'correcting' the error without any further explanation; the second way was to circle the 's', which indicates a problem without correcting it. This method supports theories about students being more responsible for their own learning (Ellis and Sinclair). We explained that the students would attempt the correction themselves, based upon the 'signal' (circling) which the teacher would then examine again.

<b>TWO-STAGE CORRECTION SYSTEM</b> Intermediate to Advanced			
The teacher will use these symbols to identify the type of error in your writing.			
Symbol	Kind of Error	Examples	Correct Sentences
c	capitalization	I went to england once.	I went to England once.
P	punctuation	She said, yes, that's right.	She said, "Yes, that's right."
//	new paragraph	//	(start a new paragraph)
S	spelling	My beind is here.	My friend is here.
PS	word form (part of speech)	She was hope.	She was hopeful.
O	plural/singular mistake	I have three sisher.	I have three sisters.
#	subject-verb agreement	She like swimming.	She likes swimming.
T	verb tense mistake	Last week I <del>hax</del> a great party.	Last week I had a great party.
[]	delete (erase)	I'm going [to] shopping.	I'm going shopping.
↑	add a word	They are my house.	They are (coming to) (going to visit) my house.
W	wrong word	Turn write at the corner.	Turn right at the corner.
A	wrong or omitted article	We're studying good book.	We're studying a good book.
↺	reverse word order	That was a movie (long).	That was a long movie.
↻	word order mistake	I (you) see (will).	I will see you.
/	separate these words (new sentence)	They'll eat dinner / they'll go home.	They'll eat dinner. Then they'll go home.
—	should be one word (combine sentences)	There was rubbish every where.	There was rubbish everywhere.
~	rewrite (unclear meaning)	I very often trying now.	I often try new things.

The appeal of the first method was obvious. It is the way the students have always learned, with an infallible teacher giving them absolute answers. Ballard and Clanchy point this out to overseas students in their book on studying in Australia: 'At school you (have been) expected to memorize and accept the information provided by your teacher or your textbook.'

However, the students agreed that the second, two-stage style of correction, with types of errors indicated by a variety of agreed symbols, was more appropriate. It is a longer, slower process, but definitely more useful for them as language learners, and it resolves the issue of a teacher dictating meaning. Students have a second chance to edit their work and discuss confusions with the teacher before it is completed. They also have the opportunity to rethink their own meanings and rewrite accurately.

<b>TWO-STAGE CORRECTION SYSTEM</b> Beginner to Pre-Intermediate			
The teacher will use these symbols to identify the type of error in your writing.			
Symbol	Kind of Error	Examples	Correct Sentences
T	verb tense	Last week, he come thailand from.	Last week, he came from Thailand.
SP	spelling mistake		
WO	word order		
PC	preposition choice (circumstance)	He is going study english on APC.	He is going to study English at APC.
P	punctuation		
↑	something missing		
()	omit word		

Admittedly, the students' decision may have been influenced by the college ethos which assumes that successful study (in the West) often requires making a 'shift to the style of thinking required in Australia' (Ballard and Clanchy), but that probably made it all the more pertinent.

For us, the staffroom debate had been very profitable. We avoided the easy 'let-the-whole-thing-blow-over' option, which would have left 'wrong' and 'right' views hanging in the air. Instead, with a little action research, which crucially involved asking the students, our agreed solution provided decisive, positive and effective strategies for improving classroom teaching which had been unanimously agreed, while allowing for differing viewpoints. It has also laid the groundwork for future open discussion.

- Allwright, R 'Classroom centered research in language teaching and learning: A brief historical review' in TESOL Quarterly, 17/2 1983
- Ballard, B and Clanchy, J Studying in Australia Longman Cheshire 1988
- Carroll, M 'Journal Writing as a Learning and Research Tool in the Adult Classroom' in TESOL Journal, Autumn 1994
- Ellis, G and Sinclair, B Learning to Learn English – A Course in Learner Training CUP 1991

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## Teacher Development Pack

Now that you have read **A Question of Correction**, complete the following tasks:

What is the value of journal writing, according to the authors?

Complete the following table

Group	For (3) or against (7)	Reasons (if given)
Teachers (1)		
Teachers (2)		
Students		

Which group do you feel most sympathy with? Why?

What is your opinion of the two-tier correction system. Would you use it? Why? Why not?