

Faculty Response to Grammar Errors in the Writing of ESL Students

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Many ESL instructors and students alike regard the teaching and learning of sentence-level grammar as boring or somewhat ineffectual, and consequently, grammar does not receive a lot of attention in many ESL classes. It is tempting to think that just as long as students have a large enough vocabulary, then the substantive words in their written sentences will carry enough meaning so that any minor slips in the function words and grammatical relationships will not seriously detract from the primary message. Unfortunately, this relaxed approach to the teaching and learning of grammar and sentence structures can backfire when we consider the long-term effects on our ESL students' success. If the readers happen to be instructors of college courses that our students take after they have finished ESL classes, then minor slips in grammar or sentence structures could prove disastrous for the ESL students. If those instructors do not fully understand what the students are writing, then the students' grades and G.P.A.'s could suffer, and the students' long term success could be jeopardized.

I decided to investigate the notion of non-ESL faculty members' responses to grammar errors in the writing of ESL students, so I gathered information in three different ways from the faculty members at Lynchburg College and Randolph-Macon Woman's College, two private liberal arts colleges in Lynchburg, Virginia. First, I gave the non-ESL English faculty members at Lynchburg College two ESL students' essays and asked them to mark whichever errors they found unacceptable in college level writing. After analyzing these marked essays, I interviewed them to probe further into their attitudes. Then I combined the information from the marked essays and the interviews into a survey, which I distributed to the Humanities, and Social and Behavioral Sciences faculty at Randolph-Macon Woman's College. My purpose here was to discover if the responses from the English faculty could be generalized to faculty in other writing-heavy

disciplines. Most of the guidelines for these procedures come from Ferris and Hedgcock (1998). Furthermore, Dana Ferris' latest book, *Treatment of Error* (2002), offers suggestions for ways to gauge faculty responses to grammar problems in the writing of ESL students.

Because of the very limited scope of this investigation, the results cannot be viewed as absolutely conclusive; nevertheless, the results are noteworthy for what they reveal about the responsibility that ESL teachers carry for their students' long-term academic success. When marking the essays, the fourteen English faculty members considered the following errors to be the most egregious: word form (particularly possessives), spelling, verb form (not verb tense), passive voice formation, subject-verb agreement, singular and plural agreement of nouns and determiners (e.g. "my two uncle"), and dependent clause structures. In fact, this list of egregious errors cannot be viewed as fixed because the types of errors that faculty consider unacceptable will vary according to such possible factors as the writer's first language, the writer's level of English, the writer's familiarity with the topic, and the mood of the instructor who is marking. Nevertheless, despite the small sample involved, this list does provide some indication of the types of errors that stigmatize ESL writers in the minds of their instructors.

Another more helpful way of categorizing the errors marked as unacceptable is offered by Lane and Lange in their editing text, *Writing Clearly* (1999). They group discrete grammar errors into three broad categories: global ESL-type errors, local ESL-type errors, and other errors, which are also made by native speakers. Using these categories, I found that the English faculty marked noticeably fewer errors in the third category. Only 36.5% of errors that are also made by native speakers were marked as unacceptable in college-level writing, whereas 45.5% of the global ESL-type errors and 51.5% of the local ESL-type errors were marked. These results suggest that the English faculty members are more tolerant of the error types they see more frequently, i.e. the types of errors that are also made by native speakers. Furthermore, these results suggest that these

instructors are more likely to develop a negative view of their ESL students' writing abilities because they perceive that the ESL students' writing contains a larger number of more serious sentence-level errors than they see in the writing of the native speaker students.

I wanted to pursue this hypothesis further, so I interviewed these fourteen English faculty members who had marked the two ESL essays. Most of them expressed empathy with students who are studying in a second language, making such comments as, "I am prepared to tolerate some minor grammar errors and some incorrect idiomatic usage." However, most of these instructors immediately followed with a qualifying remark, like "...but not in upper level business writing courses," or "...provided that the students make progress with their written grammar during the semester." This ambivalent pattern of positive remarks quickly followed by negative ones continued throughout the interviews. On the one hand, these English faculty members expressed a clear desire to help the ESL students, but on the other hand, they made such comments as, "Those serious grammar problems make it difficult for a student like the writer of the second essay to survive in a mainstream composition class."

Four of these instructors expressed concern about not wanting to use a double standard for grading the work of native speaker and ESL students: "It is unfair to the native speaker students if I give the ESL students the same grade when the ESL students' papers have many more grammatical errors in them." This comment then prompted me to ask if they thought that evidence of competent composition skills, such as paragraph organization and development of ideas, could compensate for some grammatical errors in the ESL students' writing. The responses were mixed: eight people agreed, but three disagreed. In the opinion of these three instructors, the form/content distinction is a false one. These three professors believe that any evidence of lack of control in one area of language competence will influence the chance of successful communication overall. From the point of view of linguistic analysis, this position is valid: of

course, the grammatical expressions in the writing are integral to the communication of the meaning. However, from the point of view of pedagogy, this opinion does not hold up. ESL teachers know that the complex the English grammatical system needs to be broken down into small, manageable units in order for the ESL students to master all of them and their relationships. For this pedagogical reason, most ESL instructors view the form/content distinction as a valid and important one. However, it would seem that some of our non-ESL trained English colleagues are less aware of the steps involved in second language acquisition than we are. Perhaps this difference explains some of their tendency to evaluate the grammar errors in ESL students' writing in an unsympathetic way.

Next, I administered a survey to thirteen humanities, and social and behavioral sciences faculty at Randolph-Macon Woman's College to see if these ambivalent attitudes are prevalent beyond the discipline of English. I found that most of the attitudes are similar: all survey participants unanimously agreed that they want to help ESL students; nevertheless, they are not happy if the grammar errors persist over time, and they are certainly uncomfortable with a double standard in grading. One noticeable difference with this group is that the form/content distinction seems to be less significant to them than it is to the English faculty. This finding is not surprising considering that their disciplines put less importance on the role of language.

When presented with sentences containing grammar and structure errors and asked to what extent these errors would influence their grading decisions, the humanities, and social and behavioral sciences faculty reacted similarly to the English faculty, in that they tended to overlook the errors that are made by both native speakers and ESL students more frequently than they overlooked the ESL-type errors. When the survey participants were asked to evaluate faulty sentences that were arranged in order of increasingly serious grammar errors, they indicated that the student writers'

grades would go down in proportion to the reader's difficulty in comprehending the meaning of the sentences because of the grammar errors.

Putting the statistical data from the marked essays and the surveys together with the interview data, I concluded that all non-ESL professors do have a small degree of tolerance for the grammar errors in their ESL students' writing, but it is not a high degree of tolerance. It seems that ESL students need to be able to master the grammar structures of English to the extent that their errors will not stigmatize them in their professors' eyes. If the ESL students continue to write in a way that compromises their message, their academic success and their careers could be jeopardized. After all, when our ESL students eventually graduate from college, their ultimate readers will be their employers, who, as Beason (2001) points out, may judge the grammar problems in their writing even more harshly. Therefore, when we ESL instructors are evaluating our writing courses and considering our students' long-term interests, we would be best advised not to throw our grammar baby out with the bath water.

References

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