

## **MISTAKES AND ERRORS IN STUDENTS' WRITING**

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*Grammatical accuracy in English is emphasised in the exam system in Fiji schools and consequently teachers devote much class time to it. This article reports on a piece of research which investigated the extent to which students can correct their own mistakes in the context of their own writing. The results show that nearly 50% of inaccuracies can be corrected after the teacher has indicated their location. The hypothesis used Corder's distinction between 'mistakes' and 'errors'. However, the results indicate that this distinction is not as clear-cut as expected and is therefore hard to use in empirical studies. The author proposes a third category of inaccuracy, a 'toss-up' category.*

### **Introduction**

Grammatical accuracy in the written work of Fiji's school children is an aspect of performance that features very highly in the public examinations in English taken at the Class 6, Form 2/Class 8 and Form 4 levels. This is evident in the marking scheme for the Composition Section, in which half the mark allocation is awarded for accuracy, or rather, on the basis of the number of inaccuracies. All these examinations also include a section of discrete point test items. Such an emphasis on grammatical accuracy (as much as 45% in the Fiji Eighth Year Exam) has led many teachers of English to devote a great deal of time trying to raise the level of accuracy in their students. It is my impression that this takes the form of setting numerous discrete point exercises, which have been designed with the common errors made by Fiji students in mind. This impression is based on my 29 years' experience of teaching English in many Fiji schools and at the Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE), a teacher training institution.

The research reported on in this article, was intended to show the FCAE trainees to what extent the level of accuracy can be improved by self-correction.

## **Background**

Currently in Fiji, the emphasis in 'composition writing' is on the *product*, and most teachers do not entertain the idea that students can improve their writing by revision and editing. This is the essence of the *process* approach to writing. It recognises the fact that composing is a process of thinking, exploration and revision, with the teacher as a facilitator. In the Teaching Methods (English) courses at FCAE, our trainees learn both the theory and practice of process writing. It is our hope that they will follow this approach in the schools where they will eventually teach. Not only will the content and style of their school students' writing improve, but also the level of accuracy will be raised, thereby making the discrete point exercises unnecessary.

At present, however, writing tasks are very controlled and much guidance is given, particularly in the lower forms. In fact, writing is seen more as an exercise in reinforcing language patterns the children have learned rather than a creative process. In the Link texts for Forms 1 and 2, for example, some 'composition' work involves using extended substitution tables and doing cloze exercises. Accuracy is the only criterion for marking. In Forms 3 and 4, a common procedure is to have some discussion of the topic, discuss planning, give time for writing, ask the class to check for errors and collect the work for marking, which tends to focus on the number of errors and causes teachers to complain about their students' carelessness. Some teachers require students to write corrections, but it is too late for the students to improve their grade; the die is cast, and many teachers turn to discrete point exercises to try to remedy some common errors. These are very satisfying; scores are high – but the next time the children write, the same errors crop up. There seems to be little transfer of knowledge from exercise to free writing.

Teachers could, instead, treat their students' writing as a first draft and encourage them to edit and revise, following the teacher's text-specific suggestions regarding organisation, content and style. Once the students are satisfied they have done this as well as they are able, the work can be collected again. What type of corrective feedback is needed now? Many teachers spend hours on this task, but they need not, according to the results of a study undertaken by Robb et al. (1986). Their subjects, 134 Japanese college freshmen, wrote a weekly assignment during one academic year. The students, in four groups, were given different types of feedback on their compositions: complete teacher correction, coded correction, uncoded feedback (indicating the location only) and marginal feedback (the number of errors on each line given in the margin). The participants were required to rewrite on the basis of the feedback. Test results during the year show that all the subjects improved in accuracy and only negligible differences were found in the 4 groups receiving the different types of feedback. Robb et al. suggest that elaborate forms of corrective feedback are not worth the effort.

If teachers accept this, it will surely make their work less time-consuming and, as Zamel (1985:95) puts it, '[b]y providing assistance before an essay is considered finished, we are facilitating more writing and reinforcing the idea that continued clarification and exploration may be necessary before one's meaning becomes articulated'. It is this opportunity to monitor and proofread their work that should be provided to students. If they know the location and type of error, and if they know the grammar rule (and perhaps even if they do not), they will be able to correct a lot of their 'careless' errors. During the time allocated for self-correction, the teacher can move around, helping, explaining and finding out where the students have actually been careless, and where they really need some form-focused grammar instruction.

The issue of form-focused instruction is discussed by Lightbown and Spada (1990) in their article which reports on an extensive

longitudinal project in Canada. As part of the project, they investigated the amount and type of form-focused instruction in 4 classes of 10 – 12 year-old children learning *English as a Second Language (ESL)*. All four classes were primarily communicative in their approach, focusing on meaning, not form, at least 70% of the time. When they did focus on form, the teachers seldom taught ‘grammar lessons’ or presented rules. Instead, they reacted to errors or difficulties as they occurred. The four teachers differed in the amount of time spent on form-focused instruction and the aspects of form they focused on.

After 5 months, the children were given an oral communication task. Differences among the 4 classes were revealed in the data, and Lightbown and Spada (1990:442-43) conclude:

The results . . . provide further support for the hypothesis that form-based instruction *within a communicative context* contributes to higher levels of linguistic knowledge and performance. The findings of the study suggest that accuracy, fluency and overall communicative skills are probably best developed through instruction *that is primarily meaning-based* but in which guidance is provided through timely form-focus activities and *correction in context*.

(The italics are mine.)

The emphasis is clear, viz that form-focus grammar instruction should take the form of activities and correction within a communicative, meaning-based context – what better context than the students’ own writing?

My first experience of process writing was at FCAE when the first-year students were asked to write an autobiographical essay. Their tutors (including myself) gave them feedback on style, content and grammar. My impression, after talking to many of the students, was that they appreciated their tutors’ advice and were delighted with

their final product. Certainly they followed the suggestions and improved tremendously between first and final essays

The study reported on here also used the context of the FCAE students' writing. When it came to deciding on the type of grammatical feedback to give, I decided to indicate the location of inaccuracies (by underlining) following Fathman and Whalley's method since they state that '[t]he identification of the location of errors by the teacher appears to be an effective means of helping students correct their grammar errors' (1990:185). Their study also supports the efficacy of giving feedback on both content and grammar. Their participants were 72 ESL college students who were asked to write a narrative based on a series of pictures. The students were randomly assigned to groups, to whom different types of feedback were given: grammar feedback only, content feedback only, grammar and content feedback, and no feedback. The grammar feedback consisted of underlining all grammar errors. The students were asked to revise their narratives. The original compositions and the revised drafts were assigned scores for content and grammar, the grammar score being based on the number of errors. The results of the grammar scores show that the students who had grammar feedback only reduced the mean number of errors from 11.0 to 4.2, as against from 21.1 to 11.1 for the group with grammar and content feedback. The group given no feedback went from 11.3 to 10.7, while the number of errors of the content only feedback group actually increased, going from 18.1 to 18.5! Fathman and Whalley conclude by suggesting that 'grammar and content feedback ... positively affect rewriting' (1990:185).

## **The Study**

### **Hypothesis and Rationale**

My teaching experience has shown that students do make corrections when they are given guidance and class time to do so. Therefore, I expected to find that, when I asked the FCAE trainees in the School

of language and Literacy to participate in my research, they would correct at least some of their inaccuracies if they were given enough time and the location of the inaccuracies was indicated by underlining. I hoped that they would, overall, correct enough inaccuracies to convince them that it is worthwhile giving the school students they will eventually teach the same opportunity to self-correct.

To distinguish between inaccuracies that are corrected from those that are not, I decided to use the terms *mistakes* and *errors* after Corder's definitions (1981:10). He defines a *mistake* as an error of performance, or a failure to follow a known rule. Just as native speakers of a language make mistakes, so do language learners. They are due to 'memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness and psychological conditions such as strong emotion' (op cit.). Corder also uses the term 'erroneous sentences' to describe sentences which result from failures of performance. 'The noticeable thing about erroneous sentences is that they are normally readily corrected or correctable by the speaker himself' (1981:18). *Errors*, on the other hand, are failures of competence; the learner does not know the target language rule, and is following his or her interlanguage rules. A learner's interlanguage is the language system the learner uses in the intermediate stages of learning a language (Selinker 1972). Corder (1981:17) describes it as 'regular, systematic and meaningful, i.e. it has a grammar'. Also, it is unstable; as learners acquire more knowledge of the target language, they revise their interlanguage rules.

I decided to use Corder's *mistake/error* distinction in formulating my hypothesis as it seemed to make good sense. In addition, while I had not read of any empirical studies based on his well-known distinction, neither had I read of any invalidation of it. My primary aim was to find out what proportion of inaccuracies can be self-corrected in the FCAE trainees' writing or, in Corderian terms, what is the proportion of *mistakes to errors*.

Thus, the hypothesis is that there is a significant proportion of *mistakes* as opposed to *errors* in students' writing.

### **Methodology**

This cross-sectional research project can be classified as 'action research', which is defined by Nunan (1992:229) as '[a] form of self-reflective enquiry carried out by practitioners, aimed at solving problems, improving practice, or enhancing understanding'.

### **Participants:**

30 FCAE English/Social Science first year trainees volunteered to participate. All were between 18 and 22 years old. Their first language is either Fiji Hindi (43%) or Fijian (57%). All came through the Fiji education system and entered FCAE with a pass in the Form Seven Examination. There was, however, a great deal of variation in their English competence and performance levels, related to factors such as the quality of teaching in the schools they attended, the teaching methods used there, the amount of exposure to English outside the classroom, and, as with any other group of learners, their cognitive abilities and personality.

### **Instruments**

Two free-writing tasks were set in order to elicit data. The instructions for each are reproduced below.

*Please do two pieces of writing. Choose one topic from Part A and one from Part B.*

- A. *Write an account of a time when you were really worried about something, and later you found you need not have worried,*

**or**

*Write an account of an event which made you feel very differently about a person*

*B. Write a paragraph on one of the following:*

*My ideas about marriage*

*My ideas about becoming a teacher of English*

*A person who has aroused my curiosity*

The first task was intended to elicit the use of the past tense, the second the use of the present tense and possibly the various ways of expressing the future.

### **Procedure**

There was no time limit. The scripts were numbered and collected. A week later, the scripts were returned with incorrect items underlined and the participants were asked to write corrections where they could. If they did not know the correction, they were not to write anything.

### **Identification of Inaccuracies**

Some preliminary decisions about what was to be counted as inaccurate are given below, with examples from the data.

- \* Run on sentences were to be counted (*She was very friendly to everyone and did not usually go out at nights. Let alone consuming alcohol and smoking.*), but lacking or misplaced intersentential commas were not (*However whenever we were together ....*).
- \* 'Untarget-like' expressions were not to be counted if there was no incorrectness of form. (*I thought she was doing a great thing for God by sacrificing her years as a youth.*)

- \* Several words together were to be underlined when a phrase or clause needed to be corrected. (*It was after so long that I became aware of his real qualities.*)
- \* Incorrect vocabulary usage was to be counted only where meaning was affected. (*Marriage gives way to the formation of a family.*)
- \* Two inaccuracies were to be counted where one was embedded in another. (*I advice him - for I advised him.*)
- \* If there were several tokens of the same type in the same piece of writing, they were counted as one inaccuracy. (*Eachother* occurred five times in one participant's work and was counted only once.)

## **Analyses**

### **1. Error classification**

The inaccuracies were classified mostly along grammatical lines, e.g. agreement error. Only the clear-cut cases were analysed in this way. Where the inaccuracy was not clear-cut, it was counted as an 'unclassified' inaccuracy. For each type, the number of correct corrections (C), non corrections (NC), inaccurate corrections (IC) and correct replacements (CR) were tallied. A correct replacement is when the inaccuracy is not corrected but is instead replaced by a correct but different form, as in *noting* for *writting*.

### **2. Extent**

The scripts were analysed using Lennon's definition in order to see which extent was most common. He defines *extent* as the linguistic unit (morpheme, word, phrase, clause, or sentence) needing to be deleted, replaced, supplied or re-ordered in order to repair the sentence (Lennon 1991:191). The two extents of *morpheme* and

*word* were considered as one as I did not think there was any value in counting them separately. Thus: *She was very incooperative* and *During the end of the first term* were counted as the same extent.

## **Problems**

- \* I should have asked the participants to use a different colour ink when making their corrections. It was sometimes difficult to work out which was the original and which was the correction.
- \* Some of the participants used a larger linguistic unit than was needed to repair the sentence. For example: *Marriage is a life-time comitment*. A word was needed to make the repair – *comitment* – but a phrase was used instead – *time spent together*. In the extent analysis, this was counted as *word* extent.
- \* It was sometimes very difficult to decide on the clearest way to identify and underline incorrect items so that the participants had the best opportunity to make their corrections.
- \* Subjectivity  
Error analysis judgements are necessarily somewhat subjective. This could be reduced if two judges (at least) undertook the task.

These problems, and my own inexperience in error analysis, mean that the results shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4 are only **very approximate**.

**Table 1: Examples of problems of classification**

Participant's sentence	Difficulty	Participant's correction	Conclusion
<i>It is better to have a secured job.</i>	What type of error is this? Wrong word form? Hypercorrection?	not corrected	definitely an error
<i>I told him all the truth about what we did.</i>	Is the right word underlined?	<i>I told him every detail ...</i>	classified as Correct Replacement
<i>I could only imagine their temper which would erupt ... at any minute.</i>	I originally thought the participant should have written <i>could</i> but later realised she might have meant <i>would erupt any minute now, or in a minute.</i>	Not corrected	Possibly she did not correct this because my underlining was wrong and she was sure that the use of <i>would</i> was correct.
<i>What I believe is this marriage should base on childrens decisions and not on their parents.</i>	How can the sentence construction inaccuracy best be indicated? According to: <i>What I believe is that marriage ... or: What I believe is this. Marriage ...</i>	<i>What I believe is the decision of marriage should made by teenagers and not by their parents.</i>	<i>this</i> was classified as a function word inaccuracy, and deemed Not Corrected. <i>should base</i> was Unclassified, and deemed Incorrect Correction and <i>childrens</i> and <i>parents</i> were possessive apostrophe inaccuracies, deemed Correct Replacements.
<i>Thus I prefer that it's better to have love marriage than arranged one</i>	Perhaps only <i>I prefer that</i> should have been underlined.	<i>Thus I think that love marriage is far much better than arranged marriage.</i>	<i>I think</i> was a Correct Correction but the other two inaccuracies were classified as Incorrect Replacement because of the use of <i>much</i> .

## Results

A total of 648 inaccuracies were identified. They were 'corrected' as shown below.

**Table 2 The frequency and percentage of each type of 'correction'.**

Type of correction		Frequency	Percentage
C	Correct Correction	286	44.1
NC	Not Corrected	161	24.8
IC	Incorrect Correction	136	21.0
CR	Correct Replacement	65	10.0

The range among the 30 participants is considerable: from 3 correct corrections out of 18 inaccurate items to 11 correct out of 13. Overall, the average rate of correct corrections is 47.1%. The average rate of correct replacements is 9.9%. Hence, on average, the students wrote something which was correct in 57% of cases.

**Table 3 The percentage of Correct Corrections (C) and Correct Replacements (CR) for each participant (P).**

P	%	P	%	P	%	P	%	P	%	P	%
	C		C		C		C		C		C
	CR		CR		CR		CR		CR		CR
<b>1</b>	50.0	<b>6</b>	55.0	<b>11</b>	30.4	<b>16</b>	16.7	<b>21</b>	54.5	<b>26</b>	61.5
	0		5.0		13.0		0		0		7.7
<b>2</b>	52.0	<b>7</b>	28.0	<b>12</b>	21.2	<b>17</b>	77.8	<b>22</b>	33.3	<b>27</b>	23.1
	4.0		22.0		6.1		0		12.1		38.5
<b>3</b>	84.6	<b>8</b>	55.0	<b>13</b>	75.0	<b>18</b>	46.2	<b>23</b>	47.6	<b>28</b>	66.7
	0		25.0		12.5		0		0		22.2
<b>4</b>	59.0	<b>9</b>	32.4	<b>14</b>	46.2	<b>19</b>	63.6	<b>24</b>	34.5	<b>29</b>	23.1
	2.6		5.9		3.8		0		13.8		23.1
<b>5</b>	71.4	<b>10</b>	35.3	<b>15</b>	42.3	<b>20</b>	47.1	<b>25</b>	47.4	<b>30</b>	32.0
	14.3		17.6		26.9		0		15.8		4.0

Average : Correct Corrections 47.1%  
 Correct Replacements 9.9%

The most common extent is the word/morpheme, accounting for 68.7% of cases. Phrase extent accounts for 29.6%, clause 1.4%

and there is only one case of a whole sentence needing to be changed to repair the error.

## **Discussion**

Overall, on average, 47.1% of inaccuracies were correctly corrected, which shows support for the hypothesis as this is a 'significant proportion'. I use the word 'inaccuracies' here, rather than 'mistakes', advisedly. Corder states (1981:10) that 'the problem of determining what is a learner's mistake and what a learner's error is one of some difficulty and involves a much more sophisticated study and analysis of errors than is usually accorded them'. Certainly it was difficult to unambiguously determine what were errors and what were mistakes in the data in this study. Brown, too, states that one cannot always tell the difference between a mistake and an error, and points to the subjectivity of the researcher; 'That undertaking always bears with it the chance of a faulty assumption' (1994:206).

In the data from this study, some inaccuracies can be clearly recognised as errors. Correcting *chating* with *talking*, for example, surely shows that the participant has not identified the problem as a spelling inaccuracy and one can assume, therefore, that the consonant duplication rule is not known. Mistakes, however, are not always clearly recognisable as such, as I shall explain in the next section.

In examining the data, it is important to consider two things. Firstly, it is not safe to assume that the participant knows the rule when the correction is correct since, once the type of error is identified, there may only be one way of making the correction. For example, if the participant who wrote *chating* had identified it as a spelling inaccuracy, there is really only one way of correcting it, by doubling the consonant, but is this evidence that the participant knows the rule? The situation is similar to errors produced by native speakers. A native English speaker may write *recieve* and correct it by

writing *receive* as the only other option and the most likely one. However, she may continue to get it wrong because the rule is not known. It was, in fact, an error rather than a mistake. In the data, there are 29 *will/would* inaccuracies and 76% of them were correctly corrected, but we cannot assume that these were mistakes, not errors, because the participants may have said to themselves, 'If it's not *will*, it must be *would*'. In other words, they may have made the correction by default, rather than because they knew the rule. The use of past tense for present, or vice versa, may have been corrected in the same way.

**Table 4** Frequencies of the type of 'correction' for each category of inaccuracy.

Category	Correct correction	Not Corrected	Incorrect correction	Correct replacement	TOTAL for each type	% of each type in overall total,648 inaccuracies
Past/present tense	46	13	11	4	74	11.4%
Aspect	1	0	1	1	3	0.5%
Will/would	22	2	4	1	29	4.5%
Other Tenses	15	4	8	0	27	4.2%
Word Form	22	10	10	2	44	6.8%
Redundant plural	3	0	1	1	5	0.8%
Singular/plural	7	9	3	3	22	3.4%
Agreement	11	8	6	0	25	3.9%
1 or 2 words	4	12	2	9	27	4.2%
Word Order	1	5	0	2	8	1.2%
Articles	16	8	3	8	35	5.4%
Sentence Punctuation	2	3	3	2	10	1.5%
Possessive Apostrophe	6	3	4	3	16	2.5%
Function Word		11	6	10	29	4.5%
Spelling	24	11	7	7	49	7.6%
Preposition	21	9	7	3	40	6.2%
Vocabulary	34	18	18	9	79	11.2%
Redundant word(s)	19	14	5	4	42	6.5%
Omission	13	8	10	2	33	5.1%
Unclassified	8	18	23	2	51	7.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>648</b>	

Clearly, the number of inaccuracies in a certain category is important here. (These categories must necessarily be of the 'one-rule-for-all' type, e.g. past/present tense, articles, possessive apostrophe and agreement.) If there are several inaccuracies correctly corrected, one can assume that the corrections are based on knowledge, rather than done by default (in the case of there being only one other option) or by a lucky guess. However, if, as happened in one case, there are 4 inaccuracies and two are correctly corrected, one is a correct replacement and one is incorrectly corrected, it seems clear that the participant is in a stage of transitional competence and the correct corrections may have been made by default or luck rather than knowledge of the rule.

An analysis of correct usage could help determine whether a correct correction was based on knowledge or not. If there are several cases of correct usage, one can assume knowledge of the rule, but if there are no other usages of the grammatical item, and only one inaccuracy, correctly corrected, one cannot assume this.

It is clear that much more data is needed, in addition to, as Corder says, a more sophisticated analysis. Some of the categories used in this analysis could be subdivided. The uses of *would* are many (reported speech, future in the past, conditionals etc), while the singular/plural distinction can be subdivided into, to mention a few, redundant plural, the *one of + plural noun* construction, confusion between count and non-count nouns, and problems with nouns that end in *-s* in the singular. In the data, *weakness* did not receive the required *-es* suffix, for instance. Possibly agreement would come into this area too. One participant wrote *our relationships* and corrected it, correctly, to the singular. Was this inaccuracy due to a hypothesis which went: "Our is plural so the following noun must be plural?" With more data, it would be possible to isolate each use of *would*, and each type of singular/plural usage and thus be in a better position to decide whether the inaccuracy is an error or a mistake. A learner may have mastered some uses but not others. Spelling, where there are numerous rules, and prepositions, where some

generalisations about usage can be made, are other areas which would repay a finer analysis. However, it would be pointless to subdivide the categories here because of the small amount of data (the average length of writing is 368 words) and the fact that error analysis is not the primary aim of this research. Interviews with the participants after the correction of their writing might have given some insight into whether errors or mistakes were made. However, time constraints did not permit this.

As well as intra-learner variation, there is also considerable variation across the participants. Some have very high levels of competence in a number of categories, while others show a good deal of confusion. For example, one student had problems with aspect and another made many clause and phrase extent errors and clearly needs help in sentence construction. This variation is another reason for the need to give school students the opportunity to self-correct. Their individual difficulties may be attended to in the comments teachers make and, during the time given for students to correct their writing, the teacher can attend to them individually and possibly clear up some misunderstandings.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the participants often tried to correct their work when they did not in fact know the correct form. These 'corrections' were either wrong (IC) or a correct replacement (CR). As I see it, there are three possible reasons; the participants thought either that the 'correction' was correct, or that a guess at the correct form would turn out to be right, or that they would try another route, as it were. In this case, altogether 65 attempts produced correct replacements, while 136 were incorrect. So it seems that one has almost a 50-50 chance of getting it right, good odds for students who are 'risk-takers'.

## **Conclusion**

The results in of this study clearly show the benefit of indicating the location of inaccuracies and giving students the opportunity to correct

them. The 47.1% average of correct forms in the revised writing is sufficiently convincing, but even more so when the average rate of correct replacements is added, giving a 57% correction rate overall. Had I used only a rudimentary code indicating spelling, punctuation, omissions and redundancies, the percentage would have increased further. Teachers who feel confident about using other codes, such as T for Tense and A for Agreement, and who have taught the students how to interpret the code will probably find many of these inaccuracies corrected as well. Access to a dictionary would enable students to correct spelling and the one/two words inaccuracies. The high proportion of word/morpheme and phrase extent inaccuracies makes this task less daunting. With practice, eventually students should find themselves more aware of accuracy and more capable of achieving higher levels of accuracy. Teachers will be able to spend less time correcting students' compositions and doing uncontextualised discrete-point exercises. This in turn will allow them to spend time on more useful and meaningful activities.

I now return to the hypothesis. It assumes that the error/mistake distinction is a valid one, i.e. that it is possible to determine which inaccuracies are mistakes and which are errors. This should allow us to exclude mistakes and focus on errors alone for error analysis and for teaching purposes. The question is how do we do it? Corder does not explain how to apply this distinction as a basis for empirical study, nor does anyone else, as far as I know. One objective of this study was to use the distinction in order to be able to determine which grammatical areas the participants needed help with. I assumed that the items I underlined could be classed as mistakes if they were correctly corrected, and that would allow me to work on the remaining errors, as failures of competence. However, as is clear now, my assumption was only partially supported by the evidence.

Two possible reasons can be given for the error/mistake distinction proving unworkable in this study: either the distinction is valid but my methodology was wrong, or my methodology was right but the distinction is not valid.

To consider the first possibility, perhaps I should not have underlined the inaccuracies. Corder does not mention that any indication is necessary for learners to correct their mistakes. I did it because of Fathman and Whalley's conclusion, cited earlier, and also because, according to Krashen, it is an aid to monitoring. 'Apparently, in order to bring out the conscious grammar, one needs to give the subjects time, inform them that a potential error exists, and indicate where that error may be' (Krashen, 1977, cited in McLaughlin, 1978:327). Without the underlining, how could I be sure whether or not the inaccuracy was noticed? It is a fact that people often fail to notice their own mistakes. It took three revisions of this paper before I noticed that I had left the first *r* out of *particularly*.

Then there is also the fact that I did not have a great deal of data and therefore could not do a sophisticated analysis. However, I cannot help feeling that a valid distinction should not be so very difficult to operationalise.

The second possibility is that my methodology was right but the distinction is not valid. Where does this leave error analysis, or discourse analysis? Corder (1981,10) states, '[w]e *must* ... make a distinction' and Brown (1994,205) states that 'it is *crucial* to make a distinction between mistakes and errors' (my italics), but they do not describe any procedure for doing so. It is only by making this distinction that we can exclude mistakes from the analysis, but how can this be done when, as I discovered, we cannot identify all inaccuracies unambiguously as mistakes or errors? Therefore, as it stands, how useful is this distinction? I am tempted to postulate a third category, which includes all those ambiguous cases where there is a limited number of options to choose from in making a correction, leaving the researcher uncertain whether or not the participant knew the rule, corrected by default or made a lucky guess, for I cannot see how even a sophisticated analysis can achieve total unambiguity. We could call this category the 'toss-up' category as it is a toss-up for the student whether to write, for example *will* or *would*, and it is a

toss up for the teacher or researcher; does the learner know the rule or not?

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