

Enhancing Business English Majored Students' Writing Skills: A Consciousness-Raising Approach To Reduce Common Errors At Dong Nai University”

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Abstract

Error correction is an important part of teaching, especially in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). This paper reports on the process and results of a four-week classroom experimental study that aimed to address and reduce the common types of errors that students made in their EFL writing due to the influence of their native language. The study involved the author as a teacher - researcher and a class of thirty first-year students majored in Business English at Dong Nai University, a public university in Vietnam. The study adopted a consciousness-raising approach with the goal of providing strategies to help students avoid or correct these errors. The paper also describes the design, implementation, and evaluation of the experimental process, as well as the challenges and limitations encountered. Positive results were observed, reinforcing the effectiveness of this approach.”

Keywords: error correction, consciousness-raising (CR) approach, experimental study, native language influence.

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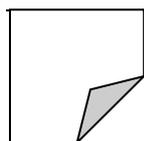
I. Introduction

Teaching is itself a process of innovation in which error correction plays a crucial part in bringing about improvement in students' native language (L1). Research on second language acquisition indicates that error correction helps learners notice the discrepancies between their output and the target language (L2), an awareness that mere exposure to the L2 does not guarantee. The importance of error correction is even more obvious in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching context where teachers are often confronted with the task of handling students' accuracy in their writing. They are bothered by the time invested in grading students' compositions. Recurrent grammatical errors seem never to disappear. EFL writing teachers are more burdened with the task because students tend to be negatively influenced by their L1 partly due to a lack of native speakers' input and opportunities to practice English in the learning environment. Likewise, first-year Business English major students in our department at Dong Nai University often make grammatical errors in writing, despite having received more than six years of obligatory EFL instruction. Furthermore, it is observed that these students demonstrate idiosyncratic weaknesses, even though they are generally exposed to the same instructional materials.

The writing teacher has faced the challenge of helping the students reduce their errors and improve their proficiency while addressing some of their common mistakes. Therefore, an innovative approach was required to overcome this challenge. The aim was to enhance the students' writing performance by making them focus on their errors.

To alleviate the writing teacher's workload and cater to the students' individual needs, an experimental study based on the findings of the teacher - researcher's previous study on the students' language transfer errors in their English writing was conducted. The aim of this study was to provide activities and remedial instruction for those students who lacked language proficiency, in order to increase their awareness of problematic grammatical patterns and improve their English writing performance. To achieve these goals, the following research questions were explored:

1. *To what extent does a consciousness-raising strategy for error correction enhance students' writing?*
2. *What are students' attitudes towards using a consciousness-raising strategy for error correction to enhance their writing?*



II. Literature Review

Interference errors and how to deal with them

A review of the literature shows that language educators distinguish two types of errors found in the interlanguages of language learners: developmental and interference. While developmental errors reflect a normal pattern of development common among all language learners, interference errors are caused by the learners' native language.

When learners use their L1 habits (patterns, systems or rules) that are different from the L2, they may make interlingua errors that hinder their acquisition of the L2 (Corder, 1971). Interference (negative transfer) occurs when the L1 negatively affects the learner's performance in the L2 (Lado, 1964).

Given this influence of the learners' first language, a natural question that arises in the mind of language teachers is what should be done to deal with language transfer errors, especially those that have been repeated for a long time.

Researchers have proposed various strategies to mitigate the impact of language transfer errors. One effective approach involves raising learners' awareness of instances where cross-linguistic influence affects their discourse. Tomasello and Herron (1989) conducted a study examining the impact of different types of feedback on students' foreign language learning. Their findings revealed that immediate correction, highlighting the contrasts between L1 and L2 forms, led to fewer transfer errors. This aligns with White's (1987) assertion that targeted grammar instruction and correction can indeed enhance language acquisition.

Karim and Nassaji (2013) further recommend that teachers pay close attention to students' language transfer mistakes. These errors can serve as a foundation for teaching, allowing instructors to explain the specific forms that transfer from L1 to L2. By doing so, teachers raise students' awareness of potential pitfalls. Additionally, providing learners with targeted practice in the problematic areas can facilitate their progress.

In summary, a multifaceted approach that combines immediate correction, explicit teaching, and focused practice can effectively address language transfer errors and promote language development among EFL learners.

Consciousness-raising approach on error correction

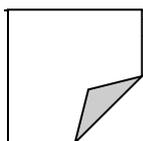
One approach to error correction that has been widely studied is consciousness-raising (CR), which aims to make learners aware of the target language grammar. Rutherford and Smith (1985) described CR as a way of "increasing the salience of underlying grammatical structures" (p. 274), and it can involve explaining rules or presenting examples (Doughty, 1991). However, not all studies agree on the effectiveness and suitability of CR for different learners. Smith (1993) questioned the usefulness of teaching metalinguistic rules, as they may be too complex and time-consuming for learners to process.

Many studies support the use of CR for treating students' errors. For example, Butler-Tanaka (2000) argued that CR can prevent fossilization, or the inability to correct persistent errors. Port (1993) recommended that teachers use CR before giving remedial strategies, to help students notice and predict their errors. Richards (2004) agreed that teachers need to help learners notice their errors first, because they will not correct them otherwise. Chan et al. (2002) also proposed that students should be aware of the problem before learning the correction techniques. They believed that CR is an effective approach to help students overcome their problems. Li and Chan (2001) also developed a consciousness-raising approach to error correction which is characterized by the following features:

- a) Input that is easy to process, based on the differences between the students' native language and the target language when needed;
- b) A series of steps with clear examples, showing how to fix the error and how to follow the target language norms by applying the steps;
- c) Explicit rules spelling out the appropriate use of the target items to help learners conceptualize the correction procedure;
- d) Reinforcement exercises.

Teacher- researcher's previous empirical study of students' errors in composition writing

Before the implementation of the experiment, the teacher researcher had conducted a research study on how the Vietnamese language had affected the students' written performance (Nguyen, 2021). Thirty students in the class had been asked to write a paragraph on either of these two given topics: "Studying abroad" and "Life in the Countryside". After analyzing the data, a list of lexicon-grammatical common error types, most of which were interlingua (i.e. apparently influenced by Vietnamese, the students' L1), was established. This list formed the basis for the selection of the error types to be treated in the proposed innovation experiment. The most common errors that were paid attention to are listed below.



Error type	Example sentence
1. Wrong usage of the verb "have" in place of the English "there + be construction"	" <i>In the countryside has</i> a lot of beautiful scenery."
2. Wrong usage of very + verb	"I <i>very</i> enjoyed living in my village."
3. Omission of the verb "be"	"People prefer to live in the countryside when they old."
4. Wrong usage or omission of articles	"I search <i>Internet</i> to look for <i>the</i> information about studying overseas."
5. Wrong usage of conjunction in pairs	<i>Because</i> my family is poor <i>so</i> they can't send me to study abroad.
6. Wrong usage of prepositions	"The people here are very nice <i>with</i> you."
7. Wrong usage of tenses	I <i>live</i> in this village since I was born.

III. Methodology

Methods

This study employed a mixed-method design to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data from the students. The following data sources were utilized:

Pre- and Post-Tests:

Before implementing the consciousness-raising (CR) approach, students completed a pre-test to assess their baseline writing skills and identify common errors.

After the CR approach instructions, a post-test was administered to measure improvements in writing proficiency and error reduction.

Questionnaire:

A questionnaire was distributed to students to gather their perceptions and feedback regarding the CR approach.

The questionnaire included items related to students' awareness of errors, strategies learned, and overall satisfaction with the approach.

The combination of pre- and post-test results and questionnaire responses allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the CR approach in addressing common errors in EFL writing among Business English students at Dong Nai University.

Research site

The study was conducted at Dong Nai University, a public higher education institution in Bien Hoa, near Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with various departments and English courses for multiple-level students. The Foreign Language Department, led by a dean, follows the curricula and courses set by the Ministry of Education and Training, but teachers can decide their own course goals, syllabus content, and teaching methods.

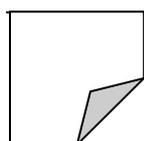
Participants

Participants

The study included a group of first-year students majoring in Business English at Dong Nai University, a public university in Vietnam. There were 30 students in the sample, including 7 males. All participants were part of a three-year Business English program, with ages ranging from 19 to 20 years.

Language Background

Prior to joining the university, all participants had extensive experience studying English during their secondary education in Vietnam. On average, they had more than six years of exposure to English language learning. Their proficiency level was considered intermediate, indicating that they were beyond beginner status.



Common Experiences

Interviews conducted with the participants revealed commonalities in their English learning experiences. Notably, they expressed frustration at their perceived inability to attain a satisfactory level of English proficiency. During their high school years, grammar instruction received significant emphasis from their teachers. Consequently, they acquired a solid understanding of grammatical rules and completed numerous exercises in class. However, opportunities for practical writing in English were scarce.

Procedures

The study spanned four weeks and occurred during normal class hours. It comprised three distinct stages:

Stage 1: Sentence-Level Activities

During the initial two weeks of the experimental study, students engaged in sentence-level activities designed to reinforce problem structures and mitigate common errors. The specific activities included:

1. **“Which Do You Prefer and Why?”** (Ur, 1988: 72): Students expressed and reported their preferences using comparative adjectives, nouns, and the verb “be.”
2. **“Sweet Consequences”** (Hadfield, 1990): Students matched reason and consequence phrases using subordinating conjunctions “so” and “because.”
3. **“Before and After”** (Ur, 1988: 198-201): Students compiled lists detailing tasks to be done and tasks already completed in the context of room cleaning. This exercise incorporated modals, present perfect, passives, and articles.

The teacher selected these activities for their relevance, creativity, and interactive nature, providing support as needed.

Stage 2: Composition Writing

In the third week, students composed essays on various themes. These themes were intentionally chosen to encourage repeated use of specific patterns and verb tenses. For instance:

- Theme: *“A Pet I Have Kept”*: Students extensively employed past tenses.
- Theme: *“A Person I Respect”*: Frequent usage of present tenses was elicited.

Additionally, the teacher furnished students with detailed prompts to enhance specificity and descriptive quality in their compositions. For example, for the pet theme, the prompt included questions such as:

- “Where and when did you acquire or adopt your pet?”
- “What were its personality traits?”

Collaborating in groups, students brainstormed ideas, sharing insights and receiving guidance from the teacher as necessary.

Stage 3: Remedial Instruction

In the fourth week of the study, the focus shifted to error correction through targeted remedial teaching. Specifically, the teacher addressed two prevalent error types identified from the initial investigation:

The “*Very + Verb*” Problem:

This error pertains to the incorrect use of the intensifier “very” in conjunction with verbs.

To address this issue, the teacher employed a visual aid—a heart symbol—to convey the concept of intensity related to the verb “like.”

Through examples and images, the teacher demonstrated how “like” can be appropriately modified using terms such as “more,” “most,” or “very much.”

Emphasis was placed on positioning “very” after the verb and its associated object.

Students were actively engaged in constructing sentences that incorporated both “like” and “very.”

The “*Somewhere Has Something*” Problem:

This error involves the misuse of the verb “have” in place of the “there + be” construction.

The teacher presented students with contrasting sentences—one correct and one incorrect—where a noun or adverbial phrase served as the subject.

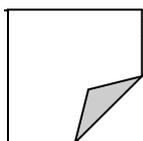
For instance:

Correct: “The table has four legs.”

Incorrect: “*On the table has a lot of books.”

Students were tasked with determining whether the subject possessed the object and whether the possessive form was appropriate.

The teacher emphasized that the erroneous sentence should be rephrased using the “there is/are” structure. Thus, the corrected version reads: “There are a lot of books on the table.”



The decision to focus exclusively on these two error types stemmed from their widespread occurrence in student papers and the need for targeted intervention. Additionally, addressing all errors simultaneously could potentially discourage students and diminish the effectiveness of the remedial instruction.

Data collection & Data Analyses-

Quantitative Data:

The study collected quantitative data from pre-tests and post-tests, each comprising 25 items. These items specifically targeted common errors identified and attributed to language transfer by students in the teacher-researcher's prior investigation (see Section 2.3). To assess the treatment's impact, a t-test was used to compare students' improvement in test results between the two assessments

Qualitative Data:

The qualitative data were obtained through students' responses to a questionnaire (see appendix). This instrument utilized a five-point Likert scale to explore various aspects related to their learning experience:

- *Satisfaction:* Students' overall contentment with the instructional intervention.
- *Motivation:* Factors influencing their motivation levels during the study.
- *Views:* Their perspectives on the effectiveness of the CR approach.
- *Challenges:* Identifying any obstacles encountered during the learning process.

By combining both quantitative and qualitative data, this study aimed to comprehensively evaluate the impact of the CR approach on students' language proficiency and writing performance.

IV. Results And Discussions

Results:

The effectiveness of the CR approach to error correction

**Table 1
Results of Paired Samples t-test for Pre-test and Post-test Scores**

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
Pre-test	31.8	6.51
Post-test	34	6.64
t-statistic	p-value	
-3.67	0.0007	

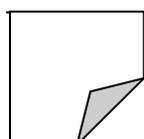
The analysis of data collected from pre- and post-tests is presented in this section. The effects of the consciousness-raising (CR) approach on students' performance were measured. In Table 1, descriptive statistics for each test's scores are summarized, along with paired-samples t-test results for the mean difference between the two tests. Notably, post-test scores (M = 34, SD = 6.64) significantly increased compared to pre-test scores (M = 31.8, SD = 6.51), $t(29) = -3.67, p < .001, d = -0.335, 95\% \text{ CI } [-3.27, -1.13]$. The observed difference rejects the null hypothesis of no mean difference between the two groups."

The results indicate that the CR approach was effective in helping the students overcome their lexicon-grammatical problems in question, as they improved their scores by an average of 4.4% from the pre-test to the post-test.

Students' attitudes towards the CR approach

Table 2: Perceptions of the CR Approach: Student Responses

Perceptions of the CR Approach: Student Responses			
Item	Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	The CR approach instruction helped me learn the grammatical rules of the target language.	4.13	0.76
2	The CR approach instruction helped me improve my writing skills.	4.07	0.79



Perceptions of the CR Approach: Student Responses			
Item	Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
3	The CR approach instruction helped me avoid making errors in my writing.	4.10	0.81
4	The CR approach instruction was easy to understand.	3.77	0.83
5	The CR approach instruction was interesting and engaging.	4.23	0.72
6	The CR approach instruction was relevant and useful for my writing needs.	4.17	0.74
7	The CR approach instruction increased my confidence in writing.	4.03	0.78
8	The CR approach instruction stimulated my curiosity and motivation to learn more.	4.20	0.75
9	The CR approach instruction was preferable to other methods of error correction.	4.00	0.80
10	The CR approach instruction was fun and enjoyable.	4.43	0.67
Overall	The experiment was a positive learning experience.	4.12	0.76

The results of the questionnaire are presented in **Table 2**, which shows the mean and standard deviation of each item, as well as the overall mean and standard deviation of the questionnaire.

The analysis of the questionnaire responses yielded several key insights regarding the effectiveness of the CR approach. Below are the conclusions drawn from the results:

Positive Attitudes Toward CR Approach:

Overall, students demonstrated positive attitudes toward the CR approach.

The overall mean score of 4.12 out of 5 indicates favorable perceptions, surpassing the midpoint of the scale.

Specifically, students found the CR approach fun and enjoyable (item 10), as evidenced by the high mean score (M = 4.43).

Areas for Improvement:

Item 4 (Easy to Understand) received a relatively lower mean score (M = 3.77), suggesting that some students found the CR approach challenging to understand.

This underscores the importance of enhancing clarity and providing adequate instructional support.

Specific Benefits of CR Approach:

Students perceived the CR approach as beneficial in various aspects:

Learning grammatical rules (item 1, M = 4.13).
Improving writing skills (item 2, M = 4.07).
Avoiding errors in writing (item 3, M = 4.10).
Increasing confidence in writing (item 7, M = 4.03).
Stimulating curiosity and motivation (item 8, M = 4.20).
Being relevant and useful for writing needs (item 6, M = 4.17).

Preference for CR Approach:

Students generally found the CR approach preferable to other error correction methods (item 9, M = 4.00).
In summary, while students appreciated the CR approach as a valuable learning tool, they also recognized its challenges. Addressing areas of difficulty and enhancing clarity could further enhance its effectiveness. Overall, the positive perceptions suggest that the CR approach holds potential for supporting student writing skills.

Discussions

The findings of this study shed light on the nuanced perceptions of students regarding the (CR) approach. While this pedagogical method is appreciated as a valuable learning tool, students also acknowledge its inherent demands and complexities. Let us explore what it means for teaching and learning.

Appreciation for the CR Approach:

Students recognize the CR approach as a valuable asset in their learning journey. Its emphasis on addressing language transfer errors and promoting grammatical awareness resonates positively with learners.
The targeted activities and remedial instruction provided within the CR framework contribute to students' understanding of problematic grammatical patterns. This appreciation underscores the effectiveness of the approach.

Acknowledgment of Demands and Complexities:

Despite its merits, the CR approach is not without challenges. Students grapple with the intricacies of language rules, especially when confronted with diverse linguistic contexts.
The CR approach requires active engagement, critical thinking, and consistent practice. Students must navigate the complexities of language structures, which can be mentally challenging.
Balancing error correction, language proficiency improvement, and maintaining motivation can be demanding. The CR approach necessitates sustained effort from both students and teachers.

Balancing Appreciation and Challenges:

Educators must strike a delicate balance between fostering appreciation for the CR approach and acknowledging its demands.
Providing targeted support and scaffolding is crucial. Remedial teaching should address specific error types while avoiding overwhelming students.
Encouraging a growth mindset—where errors are viewed as opportunities for improvement—can mitigate the perceived complexities.

Future Directions:

Long-term studies could explore the impact of the CR approach on students' overall language proficiency and writing skills.
Investigating strategies to enhance motivation and reduce cognitive load within the CR framework would be valuable.
Collaboration among educators, researchers, and curriculum designers can refine the CR approach, making it more accessible and effective.

V. Conclusion And Limitations

This study underscores the effectiveness of the Consciousness Raising (CR) approach in addressing common errors among Business English first-year students at Dong Nai University. By integrating targeted activities, compositions, and remedial instruction, the CR approach significantly enhanced students' awareness of grammatical structures and improved their writing performance.
However, it is crucial to acknowledge that students often perceive the CR approach as demanding. Balancing error correction, proficiency enhancement, and motivation remains a challenge. Educators should strategically integrate the CR approach, considering its complexities.
In summary, the CR approach holds promise, but its successful implementation requires a mindful approach that acknowledges both its merits and challenges.

On the other hand, the present study had limitations that may affect the validity and reliability of the findings. First, the study involved a small number of participants who received a short-term intervention without a comparison group. Therefore, the results may not be representative of the larger population of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners or other contexts. Second, the study focused on a limited set of lexicon-grammatical items relevant to the CR approach. Thus, the impact of the intervention on other aspects of language development was not explored. Future research could address these limitations by increasing the sample size, extending the intervention duration, employing a control group, and examining a broader range of language outcomes. Additionally, investigating factors like learners' proficiency level, motivation, attitude, or learning style could further enhance our understanding of the CR approach's effectiveness.

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