Using Surface Strategy Taxonomy to improve students' writing performance

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Abstract

Writing is one of the most essential skills for learners and generally figures for high school students' external summative exams and IELTS test results prove it. To help improve 11 grade students' writing performance a set of error codes designed on the basis of Surface Strategy Taxonomy was used within the action-research approach. The initial purpose of the study was to find an efficient way to improve 11 grade students' quality of writing. Pre-study survey revealed that students struggle with completing writing tasks, and do not pay much attention to analyzing their mistakes. During three-month period 11 students of 11th grade group received feedback on their writing tasks with the use of error codes. All in all, about 65 papers were examined and proofread. In the post-study survey students highlighted that the use of error codes helped them improve the quality of their writing papers. Revising their writing tasks with codes, they practiced editing and proofreading skills, discovered some new aspects of language in terms of lexis, grammar. Even though not all errors can be revised and corrected with the help of codes, practice of using them develops students' abilities of seeing their own mistakes while editing and proofreading their written tasks which in its case affects their writing performance positively. The findings of this research demonstrate the importance of developing students' ability to work on their mistakes and demonstrate the knowledge and skills that develop as a result of such work.

Introduction

Writing is an essential language skill since it enables students to express their ideas and thoughts clearly, communicate effectively and analyse information critically across a range of academic disciplines. Whether it is conducting research, writing an article or sending an email, students who develop strong writing skills stand out academically in every subject. However, exam results show that written communication is underdeveloped. This is evidenced by the results of external summative exams and the IELTS test, where the score for writing is one of the lowest among all four skills. This once again demonstrates the importance of paying due attention to developing this skill.

The initial aim of the study was to find an efficient way to improve 11 grade students' quality of writing. This group of students was chosen as this cohort of students had external summative assessment in English Language. As part of the exam students are assessed on the use of writing skills. In addition, 11th graders usually take the IELTS exam for their future studies and proficient written language could be an advantage. Since by grade 11, students have studied all types of academic essays according to the curriculum and have acquired vocabulary and grammar knowledge, they can express their thoughts in writing. For this reason, writing improvement in 11th grade should be approached differently. Based on this, the focus was on improving the

quality of writing through targeted work on error correction. As an appropriate approach, Surface Strategy Taxonomy was selected.

The research questions were the following: What are the types of errors which frequently occur in written speech? How useful is the use of Surface Strategy Taxonomy in improving students' writing performance?

Literature review

Making mistakes is an inevitable part of learning any language, especially when learning a foreign or third language. Learners may experience difficulties and therefore make errors, particularly with grammatical constructions. This is because each language has its own unique characteristics and its own sentence structure. These errors are part of the learning process.

Dulay et al. (2016) define four descriptive taxonomies that are most useful in categorizing errors. One of them is surface strategy taxonomy. It includes omission, addition, misinformation and misordering. According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) the following errors are included in each category:

- Omission – most common errors involve mistakes with articles and prepositions.
- Addition – use of unnecessary words in the sentences.
- Misinformation – mistakes with subject-verb agreement, word choice, spelling, etc.
- Misordering – incorrect placement of words or expressions.

There were many studies aimed at analysing the learners' errors by using surface strategy taxonomy. For example, a study by Alka et al. (2023) conducted with primary school students showed a relatively low result. This could be due to research participants' language proficiency as they were fourth grade students for whom English was a foreign language. Researchers highlighted that learners lacked English grammar knowledge, but their findings were useful for teachers to see clearly the gaps. This study indicates the importance of students' language proficiency in engaging them into practice of error correction. Another research with use of Dulay's surface strategy taxonomy completed by Bobe (2024) exposed the types of grammatical errors that high school students make in their writing so that it can help them overcome the problem and improve their learning experience.

Methodology

This Action Research study was conducted with a group of 11th grade students over a three-months period. The subject of this research contains errors from students' written work – writing parts of both summative assessment for the units and mock exam papers.

During the planning stage questions for pre-study survey were designed. The aim of the survey was to reveal what most students struggled with while completing writing tasks. The main goal was to find out whether students believe that they could improve the quality of their writing by analyzing their mistakes, and whether they analyze their mistakes in order to avoid them in the future. Based on students' responses and surface strategy taxonomy categories, a set of error codes was created.

The action stage started with introduction of error codes to students. First written papers were completed in class and collected for further evaluation. The first results of the application of

taxonomy revealed that most errors were made in categories like misinformation and omission. Students were given time to proofread their papers by analysing and correcting their mistakes.

As frequent errors revealed the gaps in students' knowledge, this allowed to plan the content of further lessons. Some revision lessons on topics which most students struggled with were planned and appropriate resources were found. Every writing task including practice tasks, writing parts of summative assessment for the units and essays written as part of mock exam papers were marked with the use of error codes.

During the entire period of this Action Research study, 65 writing tasks on different genres and topics were examined and checked with the use of these error codes. The data was collected by analysis of students' errors they made in their written pieces of work. Students assignments were collected and carefully read for further analysis of errors through surface strategy taxonomy theory. The final stage involved conduction of survey to explore students' experience with the use of codes and opinions on the quality of their written performance.

Results

At the early stage, pre-study survey responses showed that students generally do not pay much attention to analyzing their mistakes and see only grammar errors as the main problem with their performance. Furthermore, most believe their performance on assignments is directly related to the topic they are assigned, rather than to the level of their written communication skills.

The analysis of errors according to taxonomy categories showed that most errors fall into the categories of misinformation and omission. Misinformation errors were in all papers and included mistakes with subject-verb agreement and spelling of words. Students themselves noted these errors as minor and made due to carelessness and haste. But having to correct so many of these errors repeatedly developed a habit of checking these two aspects. The final papers, analyzed during the study, were distinguished by a reduction in such errors. Use of wrong words and words in wrong forms was another type of misinformation errors marked very frequently. If the first could be explained by limited vocabulary and students were not always able to correct them on their own, then the second was one of the understandable mistakes.

Another category of errors most common was omission. Students made too many mistakes with the use of articles both definite and indefinite. The nature of the mistakes with using or not using articles in written speech can be explained by the fact that they are not present in L1 or even L2. Also, students tended to make errors with prepositions – either skipping or misusing them. This is another language aspect which differs from their L1 and L2 knowledge; therefore, this type of mistakes were discussed in class to make sure that students avoid them in future.

The remaining two categories were also present among the errors, but their errors of this type were much fewer. The addition of unnecessary words, which falls under the addition category, presented a slight challenge in correction. Since a student's sentence structure may differ from the teacher's, some students argued about their errors in this category. Incorrect placement of words, which also belongs to the category "addition", was also present in some students' papers. The characteristics of these errors can be explained by the fact that word order in Kazakh sentences differs from that in English. These errors were typical of students with a less developed sense of language, meaning they lacked language knowledge.

Post-study survey was conducted in order to see students' perspective on the use of codes and their opinions about their written performance. Overall, students had a positive impression of implementation of error codes. When asked how they were useful, they noted that the markings made according to the codes helped them fill some gaps in their English language knowledge. It also helped them understand the most common mistakes they made and helped them develop the skill of recognizing and correcting their errors, thereby improving the quality of their written performance (diagrams 1 and 2). The most important thing is that this practice showed them that they can show better results by correcting their mistakes and learning from them (diagram 3).

Pedagogical implications

Some pedagogical conclusions can be drawn from this Action Research study. Firstly, written work, perfectly corrected by the teacher, does not always allow students to improve their writing. Two distinct learning processes occur when students see their errors corrected and when they correct them themselves. The latter produces more tangible results. Secondly, categorizing errors allows students to understand their weaknesses and, most importantly, areas where they excel, which positively impacts their self-confidence and abilities. Development of written communication is very challenging and time-consuming, but since it is so important, it is worth devoting a certain number of hours and lessons to its development.

References

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Appendix

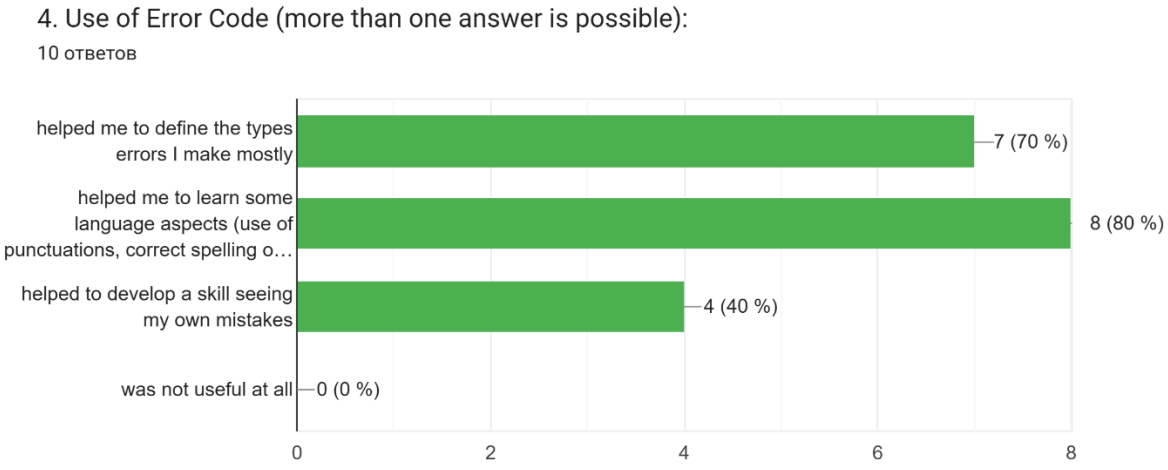

diagram 1

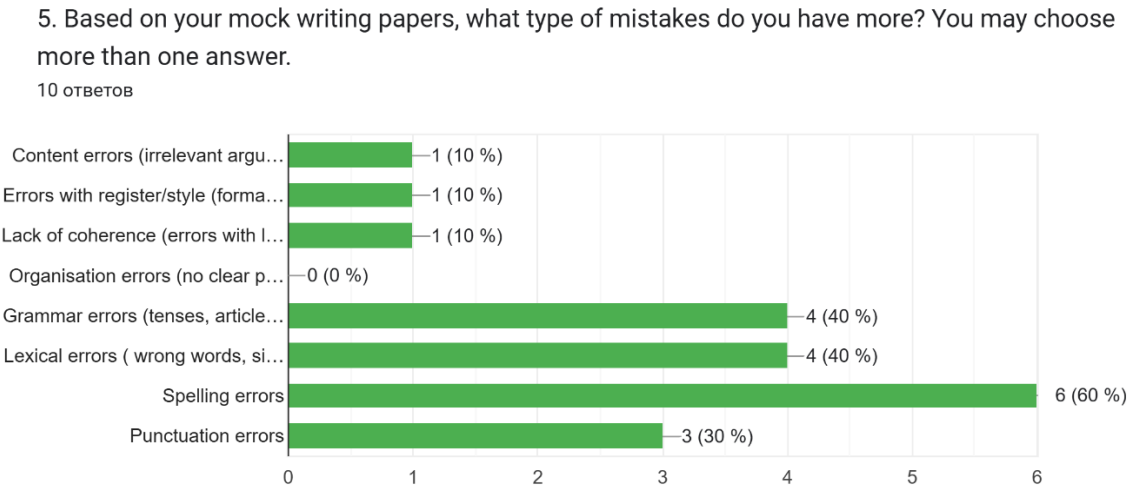

diagram 2

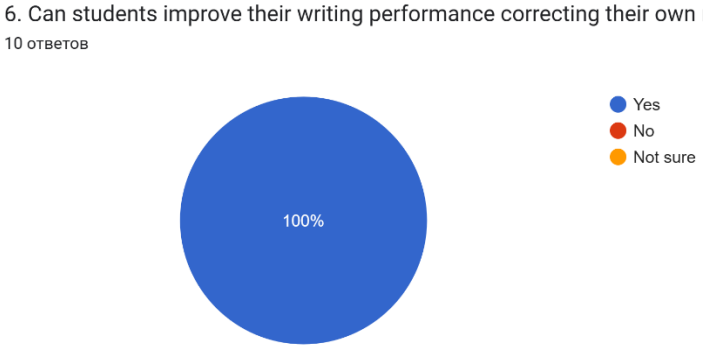

diagram 3