

Teaching German
in America:

Past Progress
and Future Promise

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Reducing Composition Errors:
An Experiment

John F. Lalande, II

State University of New York, College at Oswego

Some Students exhibit remarkable consistency: they commit the same errors or types of errors from one essay to the next. Certainly, this sort of undesirable consistency can frustrate both student and teacher alike. Irmgard Feix and Ernestine Schlant, for example, state in the preface to their intermediate level German reader that students seem to make certain mistakes over and over again, despite the fact that they have studied certain rules of grammar.¹

Fortunately or unfortunately, the problem of recurring errors is not peculiar to the teaching of German. The question remains, therefore, what measures teacher and student can take to ameliorate the situation. How can students be brought to show an appreciable decline in errors from one essay to the next, or at least from course beginning to course end?

Numerous suggestions have been advanced by foreign language methodologists, educational psychologists, and applied linguists as to how writing skills might best be developed. While many seem worthy of implementation, few offer data to support their claims of efficacy. For example, in Thomas Cooper's excellent article on the effects of sentence-combining techniques, he admits that no data were available to indicate whether positive correlation existed between the successful "hastened development of syntactic maturity" and grammatical accuracy (i.e., correctness of expression, excluding lexical errors).²

What suggestions have professionals in the field advanced to develop writing skills so that student errors decrease as their writing skill matures? A perusal of the professional literature leads to the conclusion that the following represent

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components of an effective strategy for the development of writing skills—at least for most modern foreign languages taught in this country.

Comprehensive Error Correction. While selective correction of errors is certainly defensible in the development of speaking skills, the same cannot be said where writing skills are concerned. Unless all errors are identified, the faulty linguistic structures, rather than the correct ones, may become ingrained in the student's interlanguage system. Mary Thompson's pragmatic position on error correction is difficult to rebut: "The student does not improve his skill if his work is not corrected."³

Systematic Marking of Compositions. Wilga Rivers states that many writing weaknesses in advanced foreign language classes can be traced back to a lack of thorough, systematic training during the earlier stages of foreign language learning.⁴ She also notes (255–56) that to be effective, systematic training in writing requires systematic correction of individual scripts. Andrew Cohen and Margaret Robbins also indicate that the correction of student compositions is often ineffective in reducing errors because teachers correct mistakes inconsistently.⁵

Guided-Learning and Problem-Solving. Recent literature suggests that the foreign language writing abilities of students could be favorably enhanced through strategies which promote guided-learning techniques. Pit Corder states that simple provision of the correct form may not always be the only, or indeed the most effective, form of correction: "Making a learner try to discover the right form could be more often instructive to both learner and teacher."⁶ Robert Stanley remarks that students profit from making their own corrections of mistakes and adds: "When corrections are not required of the student, the test is often glanced at briefly and consigned to oblivion."⁷ Elizabeth Ingram also contends that if learners are urged to discover relevant concepts and principles for themselves, then learning is enhanced.⁸ Problem-solving affords one the opportunity to reconstruct grammatical structures with the expressed intent of making them more adequate than would otherwise be the case.⁹

Instructional Feedback. Put simply, feedback is defined as any procedure used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong.¹⁰ Feedback is indispensable if the strategies of guided-learning and problem-solving are to be invoked by the student.

Views differ markedly on the nature and characteristics of feedback. For some, it may take the form of a simple "yes-no" answer regarding the correctness of a student response. For others, it may become rather elaborate and represent in itself a mode of instruction. Higgs proposes that teachers systematically use error codes to alert students to the nature and location of errors. In so doing, the error codes serve as a source of feedback to students.¹¹

Raymond Kulhavy has shown that where instruction in writing is concerned, feedback has its greatest impact on incorrect rather than on correct responses.¹² For many years, Skinner and other behaviorists had claimed that feedback had its greatest impact on correct responses. However, Kulhavy has demonstrated that Skinner's position is valid only in regard to *spoken* language. In view of Kulhavy's findings, therefore, any systematic model for marking compositions would appear to be most effective if student attention were directed primarily to incorrect responses.

The theoretical issues relating to comprehensive error correction, systematic marking of compositions, guided-learning and problem-solving, and instructional feedback all found practical expression in the treatments and techniques of the experiment discussed in the present essay. In fact, the primary purpose of this experiment was to test the efficacy of these techniques on the combined grammatical and orthographic correctness of compositions written by intermediate level college students studying German. A corollary interest was to determine whether the treatment was particularly effective on certain types of errors.

Research Design

Subjects. Sixty students enrolled in fourth quarter (intermediate level) German took part in the experiment conducted during spring quarter, 1979, at Pennsylvania State University. Two classes comprised the experimental group; two others, the control group.

Numerous data were collected in order to ensure that no significant differences existed between experimental and control groups before the experimental treatments were administered. A review of student overall grade point averages (GPA's) and those for previous German courses at Pennsylvania State University revealed no significant differences between groups. These data are contained in Tables 1 and 2.

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Experimental	2.67	0.89	-0.19
Control	2.71	0.87	
p < .05 (± 2.00).			

Table 2. GPA's for Previous German Courses at Pennsylvania State University: Experimental vs. Control Groups^a

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Experimental	2.64	1.41	-0.02
Control	2.65	1.33	

^aEven a section-by-section analysis of the same data in Tables 1 and 2 yielded no significant differences between groups.

Finally, pretest data were obtained from both groups. These data demonstrated also that no significant differences existed between groups in terms of writing abilities in the German language. These pretest data are particularly reliable since they were obtained from the first essay which students had written for the course. Students of all sections wrote 250-word essays in class on the same theme, within the same time constraints (45 minutes), using the same reference works, etc. Table 3 contains a breakdown of the pretest data.

Table 3. Pretest Data: Essay Errors of Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Variable ^a	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Experimental	AL	39.73	12.50	-0.15
Control	AL	39.13	17.52	
Experimental	GR	28.47	8.30	0.24
Control	GR	27.73	14.43	

^aThe AL variable pertains to all error categories irrespective of their classification as lexical, grammatical, or orthographic. The OR variable pertains only to the sum total of grammatical and orthographic errors. For an operational definition of these non-lexical errors, the reader is referred to the Error Correction Code (Appendix A). The GR variable includes all error categories except: L, NS, R, UN, X, //, and ?
p < .05 (± 1.645).

The subjects also consisted of four instructors chosen not by the experimenter, but by the Head of the Department of German. The experimenter had no input whatsoever in the decision concerning this assignment of instructors. Two of the instructors had experience in teaching the course, whereas the other two did not. When the decision was finally reached in the second week of the course which sections would be experimental and which would be control, the result was an imbal-

ance of teacher expertise in favor of the control group. Finally, a review of each instructor's teaching evaluations for the previous three quarters revealed no noteworthy differences which might have compromised the validity of the experiment.¹³

Statistical Analysis. A series of Fischer-paired t-tests were computed on the data. These tests seemed appropriate since their function is to determine whether significant differences exist between two means. Statistical difference is defined here as any t-value which equals or exceeds the minimum value necessary at the .05 level (for fifty-eight degrees of freedom).

Other Controls. Several precautions were taken to ensure that no extraneous variables might contaminate the experiment and cast doubt on its validity. First, students were never informed of their participation in an experiment.¹⁴ I assumed that students would attribute differences in class activities (pertaining to the development of writing skills) to differences in individual teaching styles. Informal discussions with students upon completion of the course revealed that our assumptions were correct. In order to preserve the clandestine operation of the experiment, the first essays were not returned to students. Since these essays constituted the pretest data base, their return was not possible without compromising the ongoing nature of the experiment.

Second, a pilot study was conducted with the four instructors to shed light on inter-rater reliability. Results indicated that inter-rater reliability was very high (.88 coefficient).¹⁵

Third, feedback was tightly controlled in this experiment. To be sure, instructors assigned grades to student compositions; however, no other forms of feedback were allowed to be written onto student essays unless it was one of the following: A = *ausgezeichnet* (excellent), B = *sehr gut* (very good), C = *befriedigend* (satisfactory), D = *mangelhaft*^a (poor), and F *ungenügend* (unsatisfactory).

Only through rigid control of the feedback variable and its potential affective quality could criticism against the study for its inability to control it be refuted. As Ellis Page observed in his classic 1958 study, feedback can exert a tremendous influence on student motivation and performance where written work is concerned. In fact, Page found that if the instructor wrote favorable and encouraging remarks onto the students' compositions, they showed significant increases or improvement whether those remarks were justified or not.¹⁶

Fourth, course content was uniform for all sections. With the exception of the experimental techniques described below, all experimental and control groups met the same number of hours and times per week; all followed the same course outlines which assured uniformity in grammar topics treated and stories dis-

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cussed. In addition, each section devoted an equal amount of classroom time to writing activities. Only the nature of those writing activities distinguished one group from the other.

Treatments

Control Group. Students in the control sections participated in an extensive grammar review and read numerous short stories by twentieth-century German authors.¹⁷ In general, instructors in these classes followed a modified audio-lingual approach; that is, listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills were stressed equally. In this group of thirty students, essays were corrected in the traditional manner, viz., the teacher entered all corrections onto students' essays and then required them to incorporate the same into a rewritten version.

Experimental Group. Students in the experimental sections used the same texts and were taught with the same instructional method as the control group. The main differences concerned how their essays were marked, and the associated rewrite activities.

The essays of these thirty students were systematically marked by means of the ECCO or Error Correction Code (Appendix A). Upon reception of the marked essays, which always occurred in the very next class meeting, students were charged with interpreting the codes, correcting their mistakes, and then re-writing the entire essay in correct form.¹⁸

The structured nature of the rewriting activity, which had to be completed within fifty minutes, compelled students to engage in guided-learning and problem-solving activities. Having been alerted to a problem (i.e., an error), students had to solve it (i.e., produce a grammatically correct response). To help solve problems, students were encouraged to use their grammar review texts. If unable to produce a correct answer with their aid, students were allowed and indeed encouraged to seek teacher or peer assistance. Where lexical errors were concerned, the instructors of experimental sections were permitted to enter written explanations onto student essays.¹⁹ As the course progressed, students monitored the frequency and recurrence of error types by referring to the second of two instruments designed for this experiment, the EASE or Error Awareness Sheet (Appendix B).²⁰

The experimental treatments might be summarized as follows: the first features systematic marking of errors, comprehensive correction of errors and feedback which is instrumental yet not affectively loaded. These in turn trigger prob-

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lem-solving strategies which must be invoked by the learner if the rewrite activities are to be completed successfully.

The second treatment occurs through the use of the Error Awareness Sheet. The expressed purposes of this treatment are, as its name implies, to make students aware of which types of errors they are committing most frequently and on a recurring basis, and to remind them of those same insights shortly before composition of the next essay. Thus, the second treatment complements the effects of the first.

The various phases of the treatments are described best in Table 4. A description of events for classes twelve through seventeen may serve to clarify the operation of events suggested by the treatments timetable. In class twelve, students composed and submitted an essay in accordance with the experimental plan. Compositions were returned to students in class thirteen who then rewrote them in class according to the group's designation as control or experimental. On this same day, students in the experimental group received the first of two treatments; the second treatment was administered in the class immediately preceding the composition of T3 (the third essay), namely, class seventeen.

Both groups were required to write five in-class essays and to engage in three in-class rewrite or correction activities. Both groups received sixty minutes for the composition of essays one and five, forty-five minutes for the composition of essays two, three, and four, and fifty minutes to complete their respective rewriting activities.

Measurement

Collection of Samples. At the end of the second and final weeks of the course (see Table 4) students wrote their first and final essays in the course. As with all essays, students were asked to write plot summaries (250 words) of stories which had been thoroughly discussed in class. This writing activity seemed most appropriate for students at this intermediate level of language learning, for not only was the vocabulary somewhat controlled, but students would be guided through a writing exercise which left little opportunity for them to feel frustrated. Often students feel frustrated because their cognitive abilities far outstrip their linguistic capability in the target language.

Analysis. As mentioned earlier, the pretests and posttests for both groups were marked by the experimenter in accordance with the ECCO. These essays were not returned to students or allowed to be reviewed by them. Essays two,

three, and four were marked and graded by the instructors of each individual section.

Table 4. Experimental Design

	Pre-test	Treatment										Post-test
	Class 6	Class 12	Class 13	Class 17	Class 18	Class 19	Class 23	Class 24	Class 25	Class 29	Class 30	
Ex. A1	T1	T2	X1+R	X2	T3	X1+R	X2	T4	X1+R	X2	T5	
Con. B2	T1	T2	R		T3	R		T4	R		T5	
Ex. A2	T1	T2	X1+R	X2	T3	X1+R	X2	T4	X1+R	X2	T5	
Con. B2	T1	T2	R		T3	R		T4	R		T5	

T = test or essay.
 R = rewriting the essay and replacing incorrect grammatical, orthographic, and lexical structures with correct ones.
 X1 = treatment 1 (commencement and implementation of problem-solving/active-correction activities).
 X2 = treatment 2 (administration of the EASE to students).

Upon collection of the pretest data, the experimenter maintained a confidential EASE for each student. Students in the experimental group received copies of the EASE; those in the control group did not.²¹

Results

Tables 5 and 6 present posttest data of combined experimental and control group sections. The data reveal significantly better scores for the experimental group, indicating that these students committed significantly fewer errors than their counterparts in the control group.²²

Table 7 presents posttest data for distinct types of grammatical and orthographic errors. An examination of these data reveals that students in the experimental group produced compositions of superior grammatical and orthographic quality, for in eleven of the twelve error categories they made significantly fewer

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errors than students in the control group. One of the error categories reflects a statistically significant difference at the .01 level.

Table 5. Post-test Data: Sum Total of Grammatical and Orthographic Errors

Group	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Experimental	30	25.83	14.19	-1.98
Control	30	32.87	16.61	

p < .05, 1 tail (± 1.645), 2 tail (t 1.96).

Table 6. Pre-test/Post-test Percentage Values of Students Realizing Gains, Decreases, and No Changes in Grammatical-Orthographic Scores

Group	Criteria	Number	Percentage ^a
Control	Score Gain (i.e., fewer errors)	7	23
	Score Decline (i.e., more errors)	22	73
	No Change	1	3
Experimental	Score Gain (i.e., fewer errors)	19	63
	Score Decline (i.e., more errors)	22	73
	No Change	1	3

^aPercentage figures have been rounded off.

Table 8 reflects the differences *within* experimental and control groups from pretest to posttest, or from the beginning of the course to its end. Measurement of performance by experimental groups indicated a slight reduction in the amount of errors. The control group, however, realized a considerable increase in errors. Although the data in Table 8 conform with the trends predicted and desired in this study, a statistical analysis of the data reveals that the acquired t-values of 1.08 and -1.32 are not significant at the .05 level.

Table 7. Post-test Data for Distinct Types of Grammatical and Orthographic Errors as Delineated on the ECCO

Code	Group ^a	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
SV	1	1.93	2.08	-1.43
	2	2.77	2.43	
PP	1	1.83	1.90	-0.08
	2	1.87	1.46	
M	1	0.80	1.27	-1.06
	2	1.13	1.17	
WO	1	4.70	4.03	-0.14
	2	4.83	3.54	
Aux	1	0.67	1.21	-0.34
	2	0.77	1.07	
G	1	1.53	1.63	-1.14
	2	2.13	2.36	
T	1	2.63	2.25	-1.22
	2	3.50	3.16	
C	1	4.87	3.33	-2.54 ^b
	2	7.30	4.04	
N	1	0.50	0.68	-0.62
	2	0.63	0.96	
Nag	1	1.60	1.25	-1.50
	2	2.23	1.94	
Ref	1	0.27	0.52	1.17
	2	0.13	0.35	
Sp	1	3.93	3.46	-1.55
	2	5.40	3.86	

^aGroup 1 represents the experimental group, group 2 the control group.
^bSignificant value at the .01 level (± 2.236).

Table 8. Pre- and Post-test Indices of Non-Lexical Errors within Groups

Group	Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Experimental	Pre	28.47	8.30	1.08
	Post	25.23	14.19	
Control	Pre	27.73	14.43	-1.32
	Post	32.87	15.61	

$p < .05$ (± 1.645).

Were significant increases or decreases in certain error categories from pretest to posttest realized within the two groups? A category-by-category analysis of in-group scores indicates that this question can be answered in the affirmative. Within the experimental group, students realized a significant reduction from pretest to posttest in orthographic errors. The pretest mean was 6.63, whereas that of the posttest had dwindled to 3.93. The obtained t-value of 2.14 was highly significant at the .01 level.

Data were also collected through questionnaires to ascertain whether students considered the respective treatments they had received to be sound, desirable, and effective approaches for the development of their German writing skills. Student responses were most favorable.²³ Several of these responses warrant particular attention.

First, seventy-two percent of students in the control group and eighty-six percent of students responding in the experimental group expressed the conviction that their writing skills had improved significantly by the end of the course.²⁴ In view of the analysis of pre-test/post-test data within groups (see Table 8), these findings are interesting indeed.

Second, eighty-six percent of students in the experimental group supported overwhelmingly the concept of rewrite activities. These students attributed their improved writing skill performances primarily to rewrite activities. Conversely, only twenty-four percent of the control group students felt that their writing activities had improved largely because of the "traditional" rewrite activities in which they had engaged.

Third, in the opinion of most students (seventy-six percent), the EASE did fulfill its intended objective of helping students to become aware of recurring errors.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the combination of error awareness and problem-solving techniques had a significant beneficial effect on the development of writing skills within the context of the experiment. Specifically, the techniques designed for, implemented, and tested in this investigation effectively prevented students from making more grammatical and orthographic errors.

Further, a detailed investigation of the data according to individual error categories revealed that experimental group students outperformed their control group counterparts in eleven out of twelve non-lexical error categories. Although lacking in statistical significance, the depth and breadth of this finding suggest that these data ought not be dismissed as superficial. In view of the obvious trend toward "across-the-board" reduction of grammatical and orthographic errors, it may be that the threshold level at which significant results would have been achieved simply had not yet been reached. A future longitudinal case-study would be appropriate.

Finally, in reference to the analysis of pretest-posttest scores within groups, the reader's attention is again directed to the single category exhibiting a significant t-value: case. If it is true, as Herbert Kufner states, that the concept of case is "one of the hardest things to teach an American student," then surely the findings reported here give reason for cautious optimism with regard to future teaching and learning efforts concerning it.²⁵

Perhaps one of the most startling discoveries of this experiment emerged from an analysis of the data contained in Table 8. When the experimental techniques and plan were originally conceived, it was thought that both groups would realize an increase in the incidence of errors from course beginning to end, but that those committed by the experimental group would be considerably fewer in number than those by the control group. This seemed to represent a logical assumption; after all, progress in learning a second language seems to entail the use of new and increasingly difficult structures.²⁶ An unscientific polling of the four instructors confirmed that, in their opinion, students had indeed used increasingly difficult structures as the course progressed. If these unsubstantiated observations are valid, then the "steadying effect" which the experimental techniques seemed to have on the increased incidence of errors is indeed noteworthy and sizeable. If these teacher observations are not valid, then students may have engaged in error avoidance strategies.²⁷ Finally, the large body of data solicited through student questionnaires lends increased support to the claims of this investigation that the underlying theoretical positions and practical realization of those positions were well-founded and well-received from a student perspective.

That a large percentage of students from *both* groups believed their writing skills to have improved significantly was an unexpected finding, particularly since the data demonstrated otherwise. Only the experimental group had realized significant improvement. In fact, the control group registered four significant areas of grammatical deterioration from pretest to posttest: number (N) at the .05 level, and subject-verb agreement (SV), mood (M), and case (C) all at the .01 level of significance. How does one explain the control group's significant increase in errors coupled with its faulty assessment that indeed the opposite had transpired? The answer may be that the feedback which they received was faulty, incomplete, or ineffective. It may be that the absence of the EASE instrument was a critical variable in their ability to gauge accurately the grammatical and orthographic quality of their essays as the course progressed.

The experiment collected a wealth of valuable data which point collectively to the efficacy of the experimental techniques upon the development of writing skills of intermediate level students studying German at Pennsylvania State University.

Limitations of Study Findings

Certain limitations are placed on the generalizability of results achieved in this study, due to its inability to control fully all of the dependent variables. One limitation involved selection of subjects. Although university scheduling procedures made it impossible to select subjects randomly, numerous data collected revealed that no significant differences existed between groups. Nevertheless, no data were collected to determine the representativeness of the intermediate learner of German or other foreign languages in different institutional settings. Hence, it would be improper to claim categorically that the results achieved in this study would be attained elsewhere as well.

A second limitation involved the relatively small number of students (60) involved in this experiment. Again, it would be inaccurate to claim that the results can be generalized to populations of intermediate level students outside the University Park campus of Pennsylvania State University.

To summarize, the investigator is cognizant of the limitations imposed on the generalizability of significant findings achieved in this study. Nevertheless, in view of the impressiveness of its findings, particularly since statistically significant data could be obtained despite the relatively small number of students, the investigator maintains that, when modified to meet the needs of different instructional settings, the techniques advocated in this study are worthy of implementation on a trial basis.

Conclusions

Several implications for the classroom teacher of German—and perhaps of other modern foreign language—emerge from this study. These implications are: (1) the development of writing skills of students at the intermediate level of foreign language study can be favorably affected through the use of appropriate techniques; (2) systematic scoring of compositions should be the rule rather than the exception at the intermediate level; (3) since the affective disposition of students is not adversely affected by total correction of written errors, and since students can be made aware of deficiencies in linguistic competence, teachers should consider seriously the adoption of a policy of total correction of written errors; (4) students should receive instructional feedback on their essays. That for grammatical and orthographic errors should inform them of the location and nature of mistakes, so that they can invoke problem-solving/active-correction strategies; (5) instructional feedback should be provided to students as swiftly as possible, i.e., no later than the class period immediately following the composition of essays; (6) students should correct their own grammatical and orthographic errors wherever possible; (7) teachers should ensure that students become aware of recurring errors on their compositions. They should also see to it that students understand the seriousness of their mistakes in relation to other types of errors; (8) teachers should endeavor to make the development of writing skills an integral part of the curriculum for the intermediate level; (9) teachers should endeavor to make writing at the intermediate level an enjoyable and productive learning experience. This study has suggested several ways in which motivation for writing essays can be enhanced, e.g., allowing students to consult teachers and peers, and to use reference materials while they are engaged in the writing activity; (10) teachers should consider rewrite activities as a worthwhile classroom activity and adjunct to composition writing, provided that they trigger student problem-solving/active correction activities.

Notes

¹Irmgard Feix and Ernestine Schlant, *Gespräche, Diskussionen und Aufsätze* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1969) v.

²Thomas C. Cooper, "Sentence Combining: An Experiment in Teaching Writing," *Modern Language Journal* 65 (1981): 158–65. The distinction between lexical and grammatical errors will be delineated later in the present article.

³Mary Thompson, "Writing in an Audio-Visual Modern Foreign Language Program," *The Teaching of German: Problems and Methods*, ed. Eberhard Reichmann (Philadelphia: NCSA,

1970) 230. My views on the issue of comprehensive correction of errors are presented in "An Error in Error-Correction Policies?" *ADFL Bulletin* 12.3 (1981): 45–47.

⁴Wilga Rivers, *Teaching Foreign Language Skills* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1968) 245.

⁵Andrew D. Cohen and Margaret Robbins, "Toward Assessing Interlanguage Performance: The Relationship between Selected Errors, Learners' Characteristics, and Learners' Explanations," *Language Learning* 26 (1976): 45.

⁶Pit Corder, "The Significance of Learner's Errors," *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 5 (1967): 169.

⁷Robert Stanley, "Dictation as a Teaching and Testing Technique," *PSMLA Bulletin* 52.2 (1979): 26.

⁸Elisabeth Ingram, "Psychology and Language Learning," *Papers in Applied Linguistics*, ed. J. P. B. Allen and S. Pit Corder, vol. 11 (London: Oxford UP, 1975) 263.

⁹Morris L. Bigge, *Learning Theories for Teachers*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 352.

¹⁰Raymond W. Kulhavy, "Feedback in Written Instruction," *Review of Educational Research* 47 (1977): 214.

¹¹Theodore V. Higgs, "Coping with Composition," *Hispania* 62 (1979): 673–78.

¹²Kulhavy 214.

¹³Instructors were most cooperative and volunteered to provide me with the desired data.

¹⁴Research designers know that if students are aware they are involved in an experiment, they tend to achieve high scores regardless of the treatment(s) involved.

¹⁵For additional information on this study consult my "Systematic Marking of German Compositions," *Die Unterrichtspraxis* 14.2 (1981): 236–45.

¹⁶Ellis B. Page, "Teacher Comments and Student Performance: A Seventy-Four Classroom Experiment in School Motivation," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 49 (1958): 173–81.

¹⁷The texts used were both authored by Kimberly Sparks and Van Horn Vail, *German in Review* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967); *Der Weg zum Lesen*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1974).

¹⁸Classes in all sections met for seventy-five-minute periods on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

¹⁹The distinction between grammatical and lexical errors is reflected in Table 3.

²⁰Students updated their EASE after essays two, three, and four. Instructors spot-checked EASE to ensure that they were being properly maintained.

²¹Upon completion of the first essay, students' copies of the EASE were prepared by the individual instructors of each experimental group section. In this way the clandestine operation of the experiment was not compromised because students may have noted handwriting styles different from those of their own instructors.

²²A similar investigation to determine whether the treatments involved in this study would significantly affect the overall (i.e., lexical, grammatical, and orthographic errors) correctness of compositions revealed that the experimental group fared considerably better (experimental group mean = 37.07, control group mean = 45.53). However, the obtained t-value of -1.60 narrowly missed significance at the .05 level.

²³For more information, see Lalande, "Systematic Marking," 241.

²⁴These data are based on fifty-eight students rather than sixty students because one in each group failed to return the questionnaire.

²⁵Kufner's comments pertain to the American student learning German. The same observation may be applied to teaching and learning situations involving the Romance and some Slavic languages

as well. See Herbert L. Kufner, *The Grammatical Structures of English and German*, Contrastive Structure Series, ed. Charles A. Ferguson (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1962) 66.

²⁶Diane Larsen-Freeman and Virginia Strom, "The Construction of a Second Language Acquisition Index of Development," *Language Learning* 27 (1977): 127.

²⁷Howard H. Kleinmann, "Avoidance Behavior in Adult Second Language Acquisition," *Language Learning* 27 (1977): 93-107.

Appendix

A. Essay Correction Code (ECCO)

- Aux Use of an improper auxiliary verb, e.g., *haben* in place of *sein*, also included may be constructions involving *werden* or a modal verb (+ infinitive).
- C A part of speech has been assigned the wrong case.
- G Wrong gender assignment to a noun or pronoun, e.g., **Die Mädchen sieht schön aus*.
- L Lexical or dictionary error, e.g., *wohnen* for *leben*; includes cognates.
- M The verb has been placed into the wrong mood; usually subjunctive will need to be replaced by the indicative or vice versa.
- N Incorrect number assignment to a noun or pronoun, e.g., **Er trägt zwei Buch*.
- Nag Noun-adjective-agreements are faulty in some way, e.g., **Meiner guter Vater*.
- NS A completely new structure is needed to convey the proper meaning, e.g., in the sentence **Paul hatte einen Vetter hieß Eduard*—the sentence may be corrected by using any one of several structural alternatives. The structure in need of replacement could be underlined.
- PP Principal part of the verb is incorrect (usually the stem).
- R Rewrite successfully completed.
- Ref If written as a reflexive construction, change to non-reflexive or vice versa. The code may also indicate use of an incorrect reflexive pronoun.
- Sp Spelling error, e.g., **Gestern kame er mit*, or **Ich kenne deisen Mann*.
- SV Subject-verb agreement is faulty in some way, e.g., **Er kommen morgen*.
- T Tense selection is in some way inappropriate; usually the student has not been consistent, e.g., **Er setzte sich an den Tisch, grüßt und bestellt ein Bier*.
- UN *Unmöglich!* No such word or construction exists in German; includes the use of English words where German versions are not known, e.g., **Ich studierte im Library*.
- WO Any error involving word order.
- X One or more words are missing and must be inserted (exception = reflexive pronouns).
- + Any especially nice touch for which the student may be awarded extra points, e.g., use of the subjunctive or passive.
- // Double lines through a word indicate that it is not necessary and must be deleted, e.g., **Ich möchte nach House zu gehen*.
- ? A question mark adjacent to a word, clause, or sentence that is underlined indicates that the reviewer could make no sense of the passage whatsoever. The student should consult a teacher, native speaker, etc.

Please note: If the student commits the exact same error more than two times (e.g., he misspells *Fräulein* as **Fraulein*), then he shall not lose additional points and there shall be no additional tallies entered onto the EASE.

B. Error Awareness Sheet (EASE)

Name _____

Course/Section _____

	Essay #1	Essay #2	Essay #3	Essay #4	Essay #5
SV 2-3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
PP 3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
UN 3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
WO 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NS 1-5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
? 1-5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Aux 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
G 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
X 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
L 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
N 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nag 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ref 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sp 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
// 0-1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
+ 1-5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Points Off	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grade/R	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Total Errors					

Which *three* types of errors have you probably made the most on your last two essays?

Time #1	Time #2	Time #3
(a) _____	(a) _____	(a) _____
(b) _____	(b) _____	(b) _____
(c) _____	(c) _____	(c) _____

Reflective Statement

At the time this article was written, relatively little attention was paid to the development of writing skills, and due to prevailing views on error correction, many in the profession had allowed themselves to be convinced that overt error correction of any kind would cause extensive, perhaps irreparable damage to a student's affect (toward foreign-language learning). One of the more significant contributions of this article was, in my opinion, to help colleagues to distinguish truth from fiction in the matter of error correction. On the basis of data collected from students, the article demonstrated that error correction manner *does* find a positive reception among students, particularly when it is done sensitively, without public embarrassment, honestly, thoroughly, and in a constructive, challenging, fair and consistent manner.

In a more indirect way, the article also promulgated what kinds of writing activities would be more appropriate and beneficial for students learning German at the intermediate level, viz., in-class generated essays which allowed students to reinforce vocabulary and structures related to literature which had been read thoroughly and discussed in class.

Of course, from a practical viewpoint, what has given this article its most enduring quality, has been the ECCO (Error Correction Code) found in Appendix A. Many colleagues have adopted the instrument wholesale or made adaptations (something which I have consistently encouraged and even done myself). In either case, I am pleased that the concepts of guided-learning and guided-discovery have come to be appreciated by those who find the code system for eventual student correction of errors to be helpful.

Having broached the topic of error correction in connection with the ECCO instrument, I would be remiss not to address one criticism of this article which has occasionally but persistently been voiced by those who have misunderstood or overlooked a basic tenet of the article's overall approach to the reduction of errors in essays written by intermediate-level students of German. Some critics, especially those who refuse to be swayed about the value of (overt) error correction of any kind, would see this article *only* as a one concerning the efficacy of error correction. What such critics have consistently failed to see is that error correction represents only *one* of three strategies advocated for the reduction of composition errors (and for improved writing skills overall). Indeed, the article consistently calls attention to a tri-pronged approach involving error correction, guided-discovery and error awareness techniques. One technique is not meant to be implemented without the other three. It is the three together which represent the overall

approach advocated for the reduction in errors, and upon which any claims toward efficacy can be based.

In these days of computer-generated reports and essays, some may question whether or not this study, which is based solely on hand-written essays, still has value. My response to such a question is a resounding "Yes!" and I shall explain why. Readers are reminded that my article, and indeed the approach originally advocated for an effective, appropriate manner of intermediate-level writing skill development in German, was predicated upon *in-class* writing of students essays. The reasons for an in-class approach, which were outlined in the original article, remain just as valid now as they were when the article first appeared. Given the fact, then, that essays are written in class, and given the fact that we are not likely to be welcoming classfuls of students toting laptop computers anytime soon, I view the approach to writing as advocated in this article still *aktuell* and *wirksam*.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge my deepest gratitude to those who deemed this article worthy of publication—both in its original and reprinted forms.