ENHANCING FOREIGN LANGUAGE WRITING IN CONTENT-BASED COURSES

(İÇERİK TABANLI DERSLERDE YABANCI DİLDE YAZMA BECERİSİNİ GELİŞTİRME)

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the appropriateness, the impact and the feasibility of giving feedback on language errors in content-based courses where the language of instruction is either a second or foreign language of the students — French in this instance. The purpose of this semester-long study was to implement a portfolio as a way for students to manage their language errors in a content-based course. This tool was used to raise students' awareness about the errors they make in their written production. In this study, 53 students had to follow several steps from correcting the errors, coding and counting the frequency of the errors, monitoring their own progress, to writing a reflective paper on their progress. The error portfolio provided the teacher with ways that would encourage students to be actively aware of their language errors without undermining their language competence and the content of this course. Results show substantive improvement in the quality of students' written production: they were engaged in improving their language by being aware of - and avoiding - error patterns that occur in their written productions.

Keywords: Focus on form, feedback on written production, portfolio education, foreign/second language writing and learning.

ÖZ

Bu makalede, eğitim dilinin öğrencilerin yabancı dili veya ikinci dili olduğu (bu çalışmada Fransızca) içerik temelli derslerde, dil hataları hakkında geribildirimde bulunmanın uygunluğu, etkisi ve uygulanabilirliği hakkındaki bir çalışmaya yer verilmektedir. Bir dönem boyunca devam eden bu çalışmanın amacı, içerik tabanlı bir derste öğrencilerin kendi dil hatalarıyla başa çıkmalarını sağlamak amacıyla dosya tutmalarını sağlamaktı. Böylelikle öğrencilerin, yazarken yapmış oldukları hatalar ile ilgili farkındalık düzeyleri arttırılmış olacaktı. Bu araştırmada 53 öğrenci, hata düzeltmekten başlayarak, hataların sıklığını sayma ve kodlamaya, kendi ilerlemelerini denetlemeye ve ilerlemeleri hakkında yansıtıcı yazılar yazmaya kadar bir dizi adımı takip etmek zorundaydılar. Bu hataların tutulduğu dosya, öğretmene, öğrencilerin kendi dil yetilerini ve dersin içeriğini hafife almadan kendi hataları hakkında aktif biçimde farkındalık oluşturmaya teşvik etme yöntemleri sunmaktaydı. Araştırma sonuçları göstermiştir ki, öğrencilerin yazdıklarının kalitesinde tatmin edici bir artış gerçekleşmiştir: öğrenciler, yazdıklarında ortaya çıkan hata desenlerinin farkına vararak ve bu hatalardan sakınarak dil becerilerini geliştirmekte başarı kaydetmişlerdir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Şekle odaklanma, yazılı çalışmalar hakkında geribildirim, dosya eğitimi, yabancı/ikinci dil yazması ve öğretimi

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INTRODUCTION

The language quality in the written production of post-secondary students has been a center of debate for more than a decade now. Kelly (2009) notes that it is "with growing disappointment about the writing ability of high school graduates, (that) educators are realizing that writing instruction can no longer be confined to the English classroom." (p.2) As college educators noted the decline in the quality of the written language among their students, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) emerged as a way to address this situation, where language mechanics would be addressed in all content courses, be it in the sciences, engineering, business, education, or the arts and humanities. WAC is an "approach that attempts to weave writing assignments throughout all content areas" (Kelly 2009, p.3) regardless of the course being taught. It is viewed as a way not only to improve students' writing abilities but also to focus their learning as stated by the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) "Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning." (p.3)

Whether implicitly or explicitly taught, several studies were conducted using various pedagogical approaches in order to improve writing, with a focus on form in content-based courses (Bazerman et al. 2005). A common variable in these studies is the language of instruction and of the students: it is English as a first language in a North-American context - and the importance of addressing written language in the content courses has been established within this context. However, little has been done to research the situation when the language of instruction is either a second or foreign language, which would raise different challenges. The urgent questions become: what happens if form is overtly dealt with in contexts when the language of instruction is not the dominant language of the students? And would the focus on writing skills in a second or foreign language be as important and as applicable as it is in a unilingual-dominant setting?

This semester-long study investigated the feasibility, impact and importance of raising students' awareness of their written language competence by explicitly implementing a portfolio where students keep track of their written progress within the requirement of the course. The language of instruction in this course is French, and for most of the students, it is a second or a foreign language that they learned in school. The goal of this study is to find out within a content course, in this case a methods course in education, if the written competence of students in French improves when students are made aware of their language errors and when they are asked to have an active role in correcting their own language.

This study is threefold: first, it aims to investigate how students react to having their second language errors identified within a content-based course. Second, it studies the applicability of the portfolio in this course. Third, it investigates whether feedback can have a positive impact on the students' self-motivation to improve their written language.

FEEDBACK AND ERROR CORRECTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The main concern in this study is the question of providing feedback in second/foreign language writing, which has been a thorny issue and a point of debate since the two seminal studies by Lalande (1982) and Semke (1984). Both studies, although contradicting, found that students do benefit from systematic feedback. On the one hand, providing feedback on language to a language learner is essential in the language acquisition process (Ferris and Robert 2001). It is an important component in improving writing, with various approaches to teaching and implementation (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994). For the language learners, feedback provides a checkup point and a validation of their learning progress (Zamel 1985).

However, providing constant correction might lower students' motivation in learning the language. It would also cause loss of interest since learners would feel that they were not progressing. Truscott (1996, 1999) argued that feedback on language, especially the mechanical and syntactical part of the language, is ineffective. In oral competence, Wong and Van Patten (2003) argue that there are some grammatical markers that should not be corrected since they do not hinder communication. However, in writing, feedback is important since mistakes would hinder the conveyed message. Ferris (1999) strongly opposes an adamant approach to not correcting language errors. When students do not receive feedback, they are less successful at producing correct language and less likely to improve their language written skills (Ferris & Robert 2001).

Between opposing research findings in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) lies the fact that feedback is important but should be done in a systemic, consistent, and non intimidating way that ensures that the language learners remain motivated to learn the language (Bitchener, 2008). This current study differs from studies in SLA and WAC in that the subjects in this study chose to receive instruction in a second or foreign language, since they chose to learn French within a minority context dominated by English. They perceive language as central to their academic progress. Moreover, these students, who will become teachers, need to 'perfect' their written language

since, in most cases; they will be the sole linguistic reference for most of their students in French immersion elementary and secondary schools. Besides handling their own errors, students would reflect on the progress of their written production.

Important Considerations for Giving Feedback

There are many considerations that need to be addressed in order to have effective feedback that contributes to language progress (Bitchner et al. 2005). These elements relate to logistics: the time and frequency of giving the feedback (Louw 2008), the manner in which this feedback is given and the implication of this feedback in the grading process.

For the students, there is a need to be aware of the purpose of the feedback (Lee 2008). In this regard, students' self esteem does not suffer; they do not feel like failures but rather they notice an effective development. They also need to feel that they can contribute to their own correction which makes them motivated to do better. Students need to see the feedback as a learning process not a grading process, where they monitor their own feedback progress.

It is important to know when to give feedback and how often. Throughout a semester, effective feedback practices are those that are done on a continuous basis (Lindgren et al., 2008). Feedback should not be given once and stopped; it should be a part of a constructive learning process through different activities. Feedback should not be given all the time: it should be provided with certain activities. In the case of this study, the feedback was given with the five short papers that students had to submit for the course, not on their exams, their homework, nor their projects. The rationale for opting for the short papers in this study is based on two elements. First, students would not be overwhelmed with work. Second, they would learn from one part of the course in order to influence and demonstrate their learning in other parts.

Within a content course, students would want all their effort to be part of the grading process. As such, feedback should be a part of the learning and the grading procedure, (Van Beuningen et al., 2008). It should be done explicitly and in a direct manner. In this study, students' error portfolios were included in their final grade: they were given importance within the course, and were taken seriously by the teacher and the students.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study took place in a University in western Canada where students choose French as their language of instruction. Although French is an official language in Canada, in the context of this study, French is in a francophone linguistic minority within an English-dominant environment. The students tend to get all their French from the classroom, where French is exclusively used among academic and non-academic staff as the language of teaching, of work and communication. Hence, the language acquisition dimension becomes an important aspect of any content course.

The competences of French among this student body are quite varied. For most students, English is dominant and French is not spoken at home nor used outside of the classroom. It is limited to the language of instruction, to formal communication among teacher and students, but hardly ever in informal and social settings, which Tarone and Swain (1995) identified as one major characteristic of the immersion programs in a minority context.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

This study targets a special student group: students in the education program, receiving a Bachelor of Education that would allow them to teach in either elementary or secondary schools where they will use French as the language of instruction in their own classes. These future teachers are in most cases the sole linguistic reference in French for the students. The competence of the latter is heavily influenced by their interaction with the teachers who become in this minority context linguistic models by "excellence;" and therefore the competences of the students will reflect those of the teacher.

This study took place for one full semester. There were two sections of the same course with a total of 53 students, all majoring in education. These students were either in their third or fourth year of their academic program. Students were divided into three "linguistic" groups. About 25% of the subjects are Anglophone students who studied French as a foreign or second language in high schools. It is also important to mention that students in this group chose to study in French: they are registered for a bilingual degree in which they would have to demonstrate a certain competence in French before being admitted to the program. The largest group of subjects is composed of students coming from the immersion programs: it constitutes the largest group with about 70 % of the subjects in this study. These students have studied French for either 7 or 9 years depending on whether they were in an early or a late immersion program. About 5% of students consist of francophone students for whom French is a first language. Students are strongly asked to

adhere to a language policy regarding the strict use of French, as a way to help them improve their language competence inside the campus. Outside of the campus, they will not have enough chances to practice French.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ERROR PORTFOLIO

At the beginning of the semester, a complete class session of one hour was devoted to explaining the purpose, procedure and parts of the portfolio, as well as its implementation, the correction and identification of errors. Students were handed a package containing several elements for the error portfolio.

List of Errors
Students received a list of all potential errors that could occur in their writing. This list did not include the random general errors that could occur, but rather it was targeted at the student population in this class. During the second day of class, students were asked to reflect on a specific theme in the content of the class. They were asked to hand in a one-page written assignment. This assignment served as a diagnostic assessment for the written language competence. From this first diagnostic assignment, all errors that occurred in the students' writing were identified and put in a list. The compilation of the list was done with the assumption that different dynamics of the student body would yield different lists of errors. Therefore, instead of giving a generic list, an adapted list was deemed more appropriate. Table 1 in appendix A shows some elements in the list of errors that the students received.

Definition of Errors
Along with the list of potential errors, students were given a document where these errors were defined. This step was done in order to ensure that students understood clearly what each error means. During the "training" class session, examples of these errors were provided along with possible correction. It was done as a group activity where students' input was elicited where all students' questions were addressed.

Students were given a list of abbreviations of the errors that they would use to identify the errors within their own papers. After receiving their written work back, students identified the type of errors using the list and definition of errors. Then they wrote the abbreviation of each error on the work itself.

Table of Errors
Students were given a blank sample table of errors. They used this table to fill in the type and frequency of errors that they identified in their papers throughout the semester. For each assignment, students would need one table

for the count and type of error, and the correction in a different color in their papers. For this course, students handed in five papers – four typed pages on average – and hence five tables were provided for each student (Table 2 in Appendix A). Students tallied the errors for each paper.

In addition, students were given a general table that contained the work for the whole semester. In this table students filled in the number of occurrences of each type of error they corrected in their papers. With such a tally, students could see the number of errors they made and how well, or not, they avoided these errors in the next assignment.

Reflective Paper

At the end of the semester, students submitted a reflective paper along with their error portfolios, in which they evaluated their own progress throughout the semester as well as the effectiveness of the portfolio in improving their written language. They reflected on the type of errors that were more prevalent in their written production. They also explained how they identified and corrected the errors, and whether or not they saw any improvement, and finally they explained the reason for this improvement or lack of it.

IMPLEMENTING THE ERROR PORTFOLIO

Both the teacher and the students were involved in the implementation of the portfolio for managing errors throughout the semester. For the teacher, it required work in preparing the material for the portfolio. First, the teacher prepared the initial handouts, and explained the progress of the portfolio, as mentioned above. After collecting each paper that addressed a certain topic of the course, the teacher read the assignment twice. In the first reading, the focus was on the content and the grading criteria that were set for the short papers. In the second reading, using a different color, the teacher underlined errors related to language in the assignment. After each assignment, the teacher organized voluntary student/teacher conferencing meetings where the students could ask for further input from the teacher and check their application of the "errors identification" list. In this respect, in addition to office hours, the teacher was available for students' questions. At the end of the semester, the teacher collected all the portfolios and assigned a grade based on the effort put into the work of the portfolio.

For students, there was a need to identify the type of errors that they made in the initial draft of the paper, using abbreviations. Students corrected the underlined words using a different color. In addition, they made a tally of the errors in the table of errors sheet. Students were encouraged to check their

correction with the teacher; they could meet with the teacher to discuss the right corrections. They were also encouraged to write a second draft, but this step was not mandatory. As a last assignment in the portfolio, students had to submit their reflective paper with their complete work.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The final results showed a statistically important progress during the course of the semester. In fact, the 'error portfolio' was a good tool that helped improve students' written production significantly. For each assignment, data was collected for each error and its frequency, first for each student and then for all students. Figure 1 below shows a visual display of the occurrence of errors throughout the semester. For the first paper, the total number of errors that were identified in the students' work was 1251 errors. The number of errors in the subsequent papers was, respectively, 785 for paper 2, 730 for paper 3, 741 for paper 4, and finally, for paper 5, it was 615 errors.
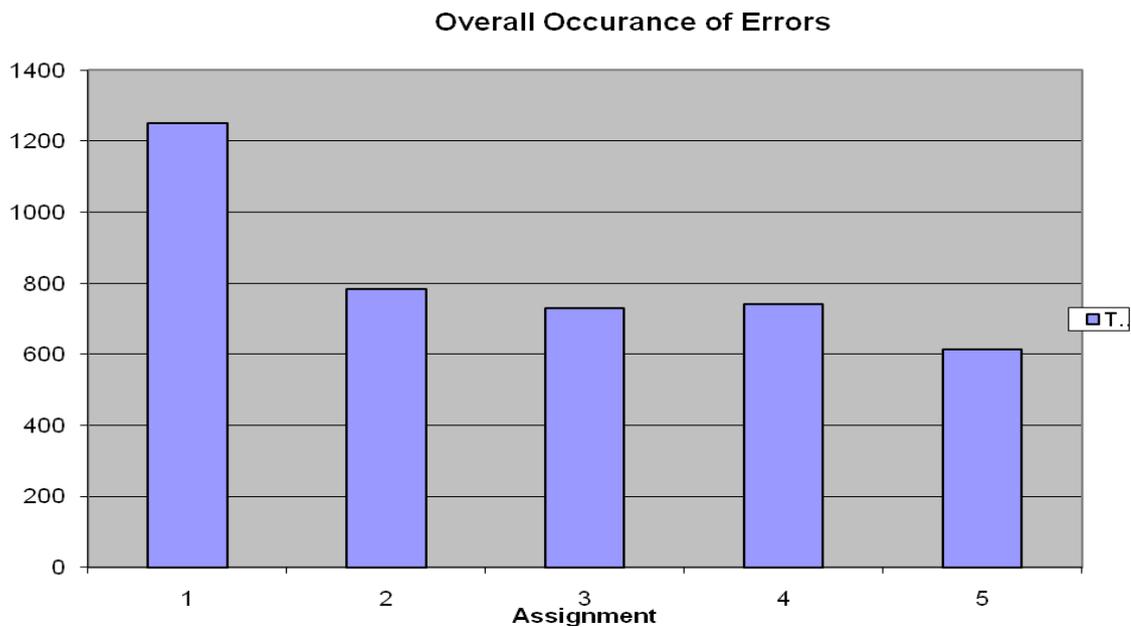
Figure 1. Frequency of Errors in the Five Papers for all Students

From the data obtained and the figure above, it can be seen that the frequency of students' errors was reduced drastically from the first written production to the second one. It is also observable that in the three middle written productions, there was not much change: in fact, it seems that a certain plateau was reached. In the last paper, a slight improvement did take place.

A paired t-test of the mean between the first written paper and the last one was conducted. Table 1 shows that the difference in the first paper and the

fifth paper between the means of the occurrence of 17 types of error for 53 subjects is statistically highly significant.

Table 1. Two-tailed, Paired T-test Results

	N	Mean	STD	SEM	t-	Sig.	95% Interval	Confidence
Devoir 1	17	73.59	38.81	9.41	7.82	.000	53,63	93,54
Devoir 5	17	36.17	30.12	7.30	4.95	.000	20,68	51,66

Figure 2 shows, over the five papers, the type and the occurrence of the errors. The most occurring error in the students' written work was the choice of words with a total of 681 occurrences. The second most prevalent errors were of two types: 1) general semantic errors, where the meaning of the sentence was not clear, with a total of 424, and 2) general structure errors, where the structure of the sentence was not appropriate, with a total of 428.
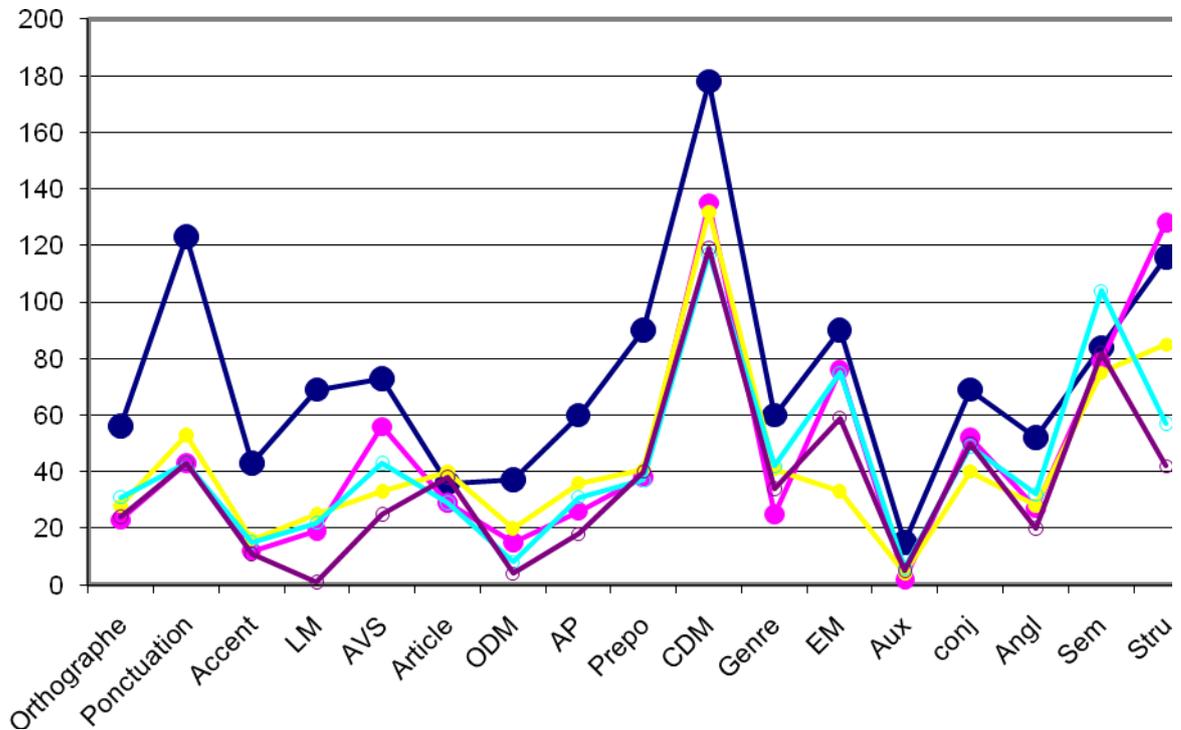

Figure 2. Type and Frequency of Errors for the Five Assignments

In the first assignment, punctuation errors were very common among students, with a total of 120 occurrences, but they dropped drastically in the subsequent 4 written assignments. For most errors that were linked to spelling, grammar, and language mechanics, a major shift happened after the first assignment; there was a major decline in all these errors. However, in the case of errors that were linked to choice of words, semantics, idioms and pragmatics, there was not much decline in the occurrence. There was a slight improvement, but it was not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The overall results show that students, once their attention was drawn to their mistakes, did well in avoiding these errors in subsequent work. In general, students did pay attention in detail to the mechanical features of the language, and hence it was easier for them to learn and remember how to correct and/or avoid them. The fact that these students pay attention to their errors has improved their written production. Their motivation rose as they progressed in the semester. Previous research (O'Sullivan and Chambers, 2006; Benson, 2001) has shown that language learners would take control of their learning process as they gained more understanding of the mechanics of the language.

Among the errors produced, the ones related to language mechanics saw the most declines. Students were able to focus more on form and corrections. This is in line with previous research where Bitchener et al. (2005) found that second language learners may, in their written production, do well in the process of acquiring new linguistic forms. They also found that they may perform with accuracy on one occasion but fail to do so on other similar occasions. However, with regard to semantic and pragmatic errors, students' progress was not so good. They did not do so well in avoiding and correcting these errors as was expected of them. This indicates that it takes more time and emphasis to learn and acquire the abstract features of the language than the mechanical ones. Another important finding is that English was very dominant in the students' production. A strong influence of the dominant language in the written production of the students is evident when it comes to deep structures of the language, in this case the pragmatics and semantics of the language. In this respect, Van Weijen et al. (2009) found that L1 would have an influence on the L2 written production of language learners.

Impact on Teaching

Grammatical structures and the mechanics of the language can be easily taught and learned. The semantics and the pragmatics of the language are harder to learn. If students' attention is drawn to the act of writing itself, they are more likely to avoid syntactical and mechanical errors. By making students responsible and aware of their errors, they are more likely to think of their language competence and hence improve their skills.

Students' Impressions

At the end of the semester, students were asked to fill in a survey where they expressed their impressions while using the error journal. They were also asked to provide feedback on different aspects of their portfolio: they were asked what they liked /disliked most, how to improve weak parts that they identified, and what activities they want to see more of in order to help implement the portfolio effectively.

The majority of students in the study liked the idea of self-correction. They appreciated having their language mistakes pointed out to them, but they learned more from correcting them themselves. At the end of the semester, they felt that they were more aware of their written production than before. They were paying more attention to what they were writing from the beginning. They paid more attention to how they phrased their thoughts from the very first drafts. Students were able to identify elements that they have problems with and consequently they were paying more attention to these self identified weaknesses when they were undertaking the task of writing; whereas if the errors were not identified by themselves, they would not be able to correct them and most importantly would not be aware of them.

The majority of students felt that this activity was worthwhile and they hoped to keep working on their weaknesses in other classes by using their own journal of errors. Because of time constraints, the compositions were not graded a second time. Students had to submit a list of identified errors and their corrections of their errors; they were also encouraged to discuss their error portfolio and their corrections with the teacher during office hours reserved for this purpose. However, most students wished they were able to submit a complete corrected second draft of their work. They did not like the idea of not being corrected a second time and of continuously working on their written productions.

Among the fifty-three students, two students disliked the use of the error portfolio, and did not like to do more work after they were handed their assignment back; that is, to identify and to correct their own errors. They viewed the journal as extra work in addition to the course work. These two

students did not like to be corrected, because they preferred that the content would be the sole evaluated factor in their work. In fact, students' needs in term of feedback differ according to their learner profile (Hyland and Hyland 2001).

Suggestions for Improvement

This study was the first step in implementing the portfolio. The main purpose was to find out if in fact it would be a feasible pedagogical tool and if it would yield good results by motivating the students to pay more attention to their work. However, for future use of the portfolio, three elements were identified as important additions to its implementation. First, students should be asked to provide a second draft of their papers with all language corrections made. This step would ensure that students take the project more seriously and give them a chance to evaluate their progress. Second, all students should be asked to attend student-teacher conferencing sessions. These sessions would provide time for both the teacher and the students to work more on the deep structure of the language. They would allow the students to have better insight into their mastery of the language, and would allow the teacher to steer the session according to students' needs. Third, it will be an important teaching tool if the students are provided with examples of corrections and errors in class after each assignment. This step will ensure that students have the opportunity to ask questions and to learn in class about their written language development.

Future Research Studies

This is a first step in a longer research project that aims to study the effect of motivation and self correction on improving language skills in an SLA context within a content-based course. This study was limited to one semester with two sections of the same course, but for the future, it would be useful to consider implementing this journal of errors over other semesters, and study its effect on longer periods of time. Furthermore, it would be important to implement this portfolio in different courses: economics, social studies, and sciences. These comparative studies would be longitudinal ones over different courses.

A major insight in this study was the different progress that different linguistic minority groups manifested. Consequently, a study could be conducted with an in-depth analysis of the type of errors made between the different linguistic groups as well as the progress among the different subgroups. In this study, it would be important to check for variability between different groups and to study the correlation between the type of errors produced and the progress made within each group.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1: A Sample from the List of Errors with their Definitions

Orthographe	Problèmes aves l'orthographe d'un mot
Ponctuation	Mauvais choix ou manque de ponctuation
Accent	Mauvais choix ou manque d'accent
Lettre majuscule	Usage erroné de la majuscule ou la minuscule
Accord verbe sujet	Accord du verbe avec son sujet est erroné
Article	Le choix de l'article n'est pas approprié. Manque d'article quand c'est nécessaire
Ordre des mots	La place des mots n'est pas bonne
Accord participe	Le participe ne s'accorde pas bien avec le sujet / ou le COD
Préposition	Choix, manque, ou usage excessif d'une préposition
Choix des mots	Choix du vocabulaire
Genre	Erreur entre le féminin et le masculin
Élément manquant	Quelque chose manque à la phrase
Auxiliaire	Fautes entre les verbes conjugués avec avoir et être
Conjugaison	Mauvaise conjugaison et choix du temps appropriés
Anglicisme	Usage des mots ou structures anglaises. Faux amis
Sémantique	L'idée de la phrase n'est pas claire.
Structure	La structure de la phrase n'est pas correcte

Table 2: A Sample from the Tallying Table of Errors

	Devoir 1	Devoir 2	Devoir3	Devoir4	Devoir 5
Orthographe					
Ponctuation					
Accent					
Lettre majuscule					
Accord verbe sujet					
Article					
Ordre des mots					
Accord participe					
Préposition					
Choix des mots					
Genre					
Élément manquant					
Auxiliaire					
Conjugaison					
Anglicisme					
Sémantique					
Structure					