

Reinforcement by Error Analysis of Multiple  
Threshold Concepts in Advanced Spanish Composition

Seán Dwyer

This year, I taught a course in advanced Spanish grammar, Spanish 302. This course provided me with an opportunity to build on a procedure I developed and refined in the Backwards by Design writing instruction workshops in 2012 and 2013 for emphasizing one of the threshold concepts in basic Spanish, noun-adjective agreement. This year's enhanced procedure, which could not be implemented easily at the 100 level, is proving to serve as a gateway to greater understanding on the part of my students of their individual strengths and weaknesses.

After the 2012 Backwards by Design Curriculum Workshop, I created an editing protocol that separated out the tasks required to proofread Spanish effectively. By using a word processor's search feature to highlight all instances of a particular type of grammatical problem, I was able to show my students that proofreading in Spanish requires different perspectives from what they were used to in English, demonstrate the value of undertaking multiple revisions (or at least passes over one revision) of essays, and give the students an effective tool for use in future Spanish editing situations.

This year's advanced course is the last grammar course taken by Spanish minors and a key course for majors, because of the writing-intensive literature courses that majors will take subsequently. I again had the students use the search feature of their preferred word processor to identify their errors to the degree that their expertise allowed. As before, I required them to submit electronic copies of each draft: article agreement, subject-verb agreement, etc.

I was not surprised by the number of very basic errors I saw in the first drafts from most of my Spanish 302 students; it is these stubborn errors that I hope to eradicate in the students who use

my editing procedure, because of their simple greater awareness of their need to review the areas in which they are weak. A number of students expressed their appreciation of the technique, because they finally had a tool to help them confront issues they knew existed in their Spanish. One student, for example, told me that her Spanish 203 professor had told her that, if she could not stop making basic adjective agreement errors, she should drop Spanish as her minor. This student, in particular, found great value in the simplicity and efficacy of the procedure.

What encouraged me was that, over the course of the various drafts, the compositions became more error-free than my Spanish 103 papers had a year earlier. The Spanish 302 students displayed their greater ability to analyze the errors; this ability stemmed from having seen all of the grammar of Spanish a second time at the 200 level. While they could not write error-free Spanish on the first pass, and they could not proofread effectively, because of a tendency to use their English proofreading protocols, they did have a rule-based understanding of their errors, once they isolated each possible type of mistake. Again, the breaking down into small, very specific tasks of the proofreading process enabled many students to find far more of their errors than when they viewed a text as a whole.

The greater base level of skill with Spanish grammar and vocabulary allowed me to demand more nuance in the writing by the students in Spanish 302. We discussed the subjunctive mood in great detail, and the more complex sentence structure required to use the subjunctive properly gave me yet another area to work on with the search-editing method. Of course, the students also could find more ways to make errors, and in this area, where the decision to create a subordinate clause or not depends on having a change of subject, the search term, and the subsequent identification of any errors, demanded more subtlety than with the threshold concept of agreement errors.

In addition to the increased detail of the proofreading method, I implemented an additional step that is the focus of this year's assessment. Rather than determine the students' progress on the

basis of their proofreading skills alone, I gave them a further task: after I correct their papers (which I will discuss in a moment), they fix their errors and write a short narrative in which they analyze the types of errors they make, and how they will work to prevent such errors in the future. As with the proofreading protocol, the goal is to give the students a means to become independent proofreaders and good writers of Spanish.

In my marking of their compositions, I do not prescribe fixes for their errors. By the time I give students any feedback, they have produced ten drafts of their paper, received peer-editing feedback from two classmates, had a ten-minute session where those two classmates describe why they marked the papers as they did, and incorporated the peer edits into a submittable draft.

In all cases, the version I received after edits was far improved in comparison to the original draft, a copy of which I use to measure progress. Even so, all of the compositions included some errors that no one caught. As I said, I don't give them the answers; I point out deficiencies. I mark the papers with this system:

- Green highlighting: Grammar issue, most often verb conjugation errors
- Blue: Word choice, spelling errors
- Yellow: Agreement error, noun-adjective or subject-verb
- Orange: Past aspect (preterite vs. imperfect)
- Dreaded Pink Brackets: A phrase or sentence that has too many errors to mark

When they receive the marked compositions, they receive the next task, which is as follows:

### **After Writing: Analysis of Your Composition**

This task facilitates learning from your own errors and successes. When you finish, you will turn in the completed edits, two lists of errors, and a short paragraph.

- Number the lines of your composition.
  - 1. *Corrected errors*: Prepare a list of all of the errors you know how to correct on your own, with their line number, and correct the errors.
  - 2. *Errors you don't understand*: Prepare another list of the errors you don't know how to correct (with their line number).
  - 3. *Analysis*: Analyze the lists, and note what you do well and what you need to improve. Show the most positive and the most negative aspects of your composition.
- 

I use the color coding so the students can see at a glance the predominant color(s) and the types of errors they signify. My students vary in error types; some are weak on verb conjugation, while others have weak vocabularies. The Dreaded Pink Brackets rarely appear at this level of Spanish, but when they do, they indicate that students are thinking too much in English and weakening their syntax.

The analysis allows students to converse with themselves, and with me, about their strengths and weaknesses, and how they can strategize to improve their all-around writing skills. As a follow-up to the automated search for grammatical errors, the analysis brings the students to a confrontation with their current skill level. In the hands of a student who is determined to excel at Spanish, the data that the analysis produces have a long-term positive effect on learning strategies. Students know where to direct their personal study and review program for the benefit of their Spanish skills.

As a reinforcement of several threshold concepts in Spanish grammar, the analysis of errors serves a profound role in the trajectory of students' self-teaching. I believe the analytical step has great benefits for students who have risen to a level of Spanish grammar abilities at which they can articulate the types of errors they are making. I will, therefore, continue to use this effective tool, because it provides valuable insight for my students into their individual study needs.