How Useful are Handbooks for Second Language Writers?

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It is a widely accepted assumption that writers and their teachers should focus first, and above all, on the communication of meaning, and that any focus on formal aspects of language, while important, comes second, both in significance and, often, chronologically in the writing process.[1] Most teachers of second language writing would share this assumption, as do we. However, the continuing sentence-level problems that so many English as a Second Language (ESL) writers demonstrate—even while the content and organization of their writing may meet expectations—have caused many writing teachers with ESL writers in their classes to turn to handbooks for help. That help has not always been forthcoming, and results, in terms of positive change in the writing of their students, have not always been evident. With so many ESL writers coming to two- and four-year colleges and universities, it seems a good time to examine and analyze these handbooks in an effort to determine how they might best be used to help ESL writers toward higher levels of accuracy.

We began this endeavor several years ago when the composition office decided to select a single handbook for the program. One of the authors (Williams) was asked to review about a dozen handbooks and recommend one from an ESL perspective. As linguists and ESL professionals, we have often been asked to help address the needs and challenges of the growing group of ESL writers in our composition classes. As at many similar institutions, our composition staff has neither the resources nor the expertise to focus on these needs. Unfortunately, the composition literature offers little guidance as to the use of handbooks with ESL writers. Indeed, an informed perspective on second language writing research is mostly lacking in composition studies (Matsuda, "Situating"; Silva, Leki, and Carson). Instead, the field of second language writing tends to draw more directly on

linguistics, often through its connection to TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). Paul Kei Matsuda points to the "disciplinary division of labor" between the two fields, with different research and pedagogical approaches, contrasting professional preparation, and even different journals ("Composition" 699). We hope that a perspective from outside the field will provide some fresh insight into the issue of handbook use.

In this article, we try to address some basic questions of handbook use: Insofar as second language issues are concerned, what positive role(s) can handbooks play? Whom can they help and how? What are their limitations? We hope to provide some guidance to writing program administrators, especially those responsible for preparing instructors and teaching assistants, and to all composition teachers who have ESL writers in their classes. We will focus on which features and tasks are most likely to be helpful and effective tools in promoting competent second language writing, and suggest ways to improve current handbook activities and use. We will primarily examine sentence-level accuracy because this is the problem for which most teachers advise ESL writers in their classes to consult handbooks, or for which the teachers themselves most often turn to handbooks for assistance.[2] We believe that handbooks could be improved with the inclusion of activities such as contextualized exercises and the development of self-editing strategies. We also contend that teachers can benefit from a greater understanding of second language learning and that this knowledge can temper their expectations regarding the utility of handbooks.

Handbooks are curious beasts, and they seem to get curiouser and curiouser with each edition. They began as reference books to be consulted on questions of grammar and style. Gradually they have come to address other topics, from the writing process, to citation conventions, to research strategies. They also serve other purposes, from informing teachers of new research and practices, to helping students use internet resources and to write effectively in their own disciplines (Broadbent; Connors, "Handbooks," "Mechanical"; Hawhee). Every handbook stresses the singular importance of knowing one's audience and understanding the purpose of a piece of writing. Yet, handbooks themselves have been pulled in many directions to serve a variety of audiences. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the recent inclusion of material to assist ESL writers.

Though they have also been described as the teachers of teachers (Hawhee 514), handbooks are ostensibly for students and other writers who want to improve their writing. However, in many cases, the audience for the ESL sections, notes, and alerts in the latest editions

of standard handbooks seems more clearly to be the instructors, who may suddenly be confronted with a significant number of ESL writers in their classes. These instructors may be bewildered by the writing of these students, resulting in a variety of responses, ranging from anger that the students' problems have not been "taken care of" in earlier ESL classes, to benign neglect with the accompanying attitude that ESL writers' unique problems will disappear on their own, to a knee-jerk focus on grammar and a tendency to refer ESL writers to metalinguistic explanations and mechanical drills. Thus, it seems that the ESL portions of handbooks have two different purposes: to assist ESL writers in improving accuracy in their own writing and to inform writing teachers about the challenges faced by ESL writers. Because the needs of the two groups are quite different, the effectiveness of handbooks in addressing these two audiences has to be evaluated separately.

We begin with the teacher audience, especially those whose knowledge of second language issues is limited. In order for teachers to help their students improve their sentence-level accuracy, it is important for the teachers to understand grammatical systems at a metalinguistic level. Obviously, they have intuitive knowledge of grammar, but if a student asks, for instance, why the present perfect rather than the simple past is the more appropriate tense choice, teachers cannot simply reply that one tense "sounds better." Such intuition is one of the defining characteristics of a native speaker and most ESL writers cannot make or profit from such judgments. Therefore, teachers have to be ready with a brief and clear explanation of why one form rather than another should be used. Yet, how many composition teachers have at their fingertips explanations for, say, the distribution of definite and indefinite articles? Many are probably not even aware of the difference between count and non-count nouns. And indeed, why should they be? It is not an issue that comes up with native speakers. This then, is one useful function of the ESL material in handbooks: it can help formalize teachers' intuitive knowledge of grammar, especially in areas that are problematic specifically for ESL writers.

If the ESL material in handbooks is potentially helpful for teachers, what sort of presentation works best? Handbooks generally take one of three approaches: (1) a separate ESL section (for example, Hairston, Ruskiewicz and Friend;[3] Kirszner and Mandell; Rosen and Behrens); (2) scattered notes and alerts that are integrated with the rest of the text and are signaled with some symbol (for example, Anson and Schwegler; Fowler and Aaron); and (3) a combination of the two, usually with cross-referencing (for example, Hult and Huckin; Lunsford and Connors; Troyka). There are political overtones to choosing either approach.

Particularly, if one assumes the major audience for the handbook is the student, some would argue that setting aside a separate section for ESL writers is alienating, an example of *othering.* Another argument against a separate section for ESL writers is the tremendous overlap in the challenges faced by ESL writers and novice native English writers. It makes little sense to cover the same material twice in two separate sections. We believe that the combined approach is the most valuable for teachers because it addresses their needs on two fronts. Scattered flags and notes within a section that is directed at native English writers can alert teachers to potential ESL problems that may not have occurred to them and refer them to more extensive treatment in the ESL section. On the other hand, if teachers simply want to inform themselves of ESL issues in general, the separate section can provide a valuable orientation, a goal that would be difficult to accomplish with only intermittent ESL references.

Many handbooks have also begun to address how differences in cultural and educational background may affect the writing process and product. Ilona Leki argues that many presentations on contrastive rhetoric, the term often used to refer to these differences, tend to be reductionist, in that all learners of a cultural or linguistic background may then automatically be assumed to write, or even think, in a certain way. This becomes particularly insidious when extensive research in this area is captured in simplistic statements, such as, Chinese writers value digression in their essays (for example, Kirszner and Mandell A15). Although we wholeheartedly agree with Leki's cautions (237-40), it remains important that teachers be aware of the influence that ESL students' cultural and educational backgrounds may have on their writing.

Finally, handbooks can provide guidance for teachers by describing and explaining learners' errors (Raimes, "Errors"). Many composition instructors are baffled by ESL errors in writing, even if they have a full understanding of the grammar. Why on earth do learners write sentences such as these?

> This poem I think we can learn a lot.

> The reason that they don't have sanitary condition.

In some cases, we may gain insight from the first languages of these writers. Some handbooks provide examples of errors that are typical of writers from specific language backgrounds as well as some explanation for why these writers produce such errors (for example, Anson and Schwegler; Lunsford and Connors). For instance, the first sentence may

be a reflection of one word-order pattern typical in Chinese, in which the general topic of the sentence is stated first.

> This poem I think we can learn a lot.
>
> *Topic   Comment*
>
> I think we can learn a lot from this poem.

For the second example, teachers might assume that it is a fragment consisting of a head noun followed by a relative clause and, as a result, they may attempt to complete the sentence: *The reason that they don't have sanitary condition is. . . .* In fact, it is more likely that this sentence is simply an example of omission of the copula, (the verb, *to be*), an option or requirement in many languages.

> The reason IS that they don't have sanitary condition(s).

However, it is important to stress that learner-error profiles cannot be reduced to a simple contrastive analysis between the writer's first language and English. There are many other factors that come into play: the learner's readiness to acquire a structure; the processing load involved in managing content, organization, and sentence-level accuracy; and the complexity of the grammatical system in which the error occurs. Finally, it is important to make note of those daunting sentences produced by ESL writers that cannot be captured with a simple explanation and that no handbook on earth can untangle:

> Family is the most basic of all situation material relationship
> and closely put together with effects of individual of both
> families marriage that last through generation.

This may be an extreme example, but it is one familiar to many ESL writing teachers. This writer is reaching for academic writing without the linguistic proficiency that it requires. Simply discovering this writer's intentions will probably require a face-to-face conference; helping her toward target-like accuracy will take much more, far more than any handbook can offer. Learners like this are simply not ready to use a handbook and asking them to do so is futile. In short, some of these problems are not easily addressed or accommodated by a handbook, but including examples of typical ESL errors can be helpful in reassuring teachers that the kinds of errors that ESL writers make in their classes are indeed frequent, to be expected, and not anyone's fault.

In the end, however, the primary audience for handbooks is students. Unfortunately, we have often observed teachers simply direct-

ing ESL writers with problems to pertinent sections of the handbook, hoping that learners can understand and use the explanations that they offer. How useful to ESL writers is the material in handbooks? We will argue that, depending on how the material is used, its utility may be limited. What material does a handbook contain that might be helpful to an ESL writer? Obviously, all of them contain a compendium of grammatical rules. The breadth and quality of the rule coverage in handbooks vary considerably. Some go into grammatical explanations in excruciating detail; others offer rules of thumb that are targeted at writers who are less familiar with metalinguistic vocabulary. Some try to cover every grammatical category that an ESL writer might need; others simply try to pick a few that are the most common. It is difficult to compare and evaluate the grammatical coverage in handbooks because it is impossible to know who will be using them: an explanation that might result in one learner's glazed confusion could well be just right for another learner. Learners' developmental readiness has everything to do with whether or not they can and will take advantage of the opportunities for learning that are offered to them. ESL grammar textbook writers attempt to exploit learners' developmental readiness for instruction by making idealized (and usually unwarranted) assumptions about the uniformity of the language proficiency of their target population. They simply assume that what is contained in their textbook is the next developmental step for these learners. Handbook writers and editors—because their ESL target audience is so diverse in terms of needs, goals, and proficiency levels—cannot make any such assumption.

For this reason, we turn to what we think is the more crucial issue in comparing and evaluating handbooks, that is, the activities that they offer for learning and using the grammar they present. For the purpose of this review, we have chosen to examine only student handbooks, exclusive of any ancillaries that may be available. We do realize that many handbooks have instructors' editions that may address second language writing in greater depth and that some even have separate texts and workbooks that focus exclusively on ESL issues. In a few cases, the kind of treatment we are recommending is, in fact, available in the ancillary materials. Some of these, particularly interactive CDs and web-based materials, offer great promise, with their ability to individualize and make problematic material salient. However, in evaluating only the student handbook, we sought to focus on the material to which a majority of students and their teachers are likely to have access.

Both in the presentation of rules and conventions,[4] and in subsequent activities, most handbooks limit themselves to the sentence level. They generally provide (1) rules, e.g., "Only the gerund form can follow a preposition"; and (2) examples of correct and incorrect usage, e.g., "He thought about go to his friend's house" and "He thought about going to his friend's house." Both of these may come in the form of "alerts" in which common ESL problems are flagged. Finally, handbooks may contain (3) exercises in which learners are to practice using the knowledge they have gained from the rule provision portion of the material. These may take a traditional form, such as a slot-and-filler drill, e.g., "(The, A, Ø) newest technology allows us to send (the, a, ø) picture over (the, a, ø) internet instantly" (for example, Rosen and Behrens)*, or an editing exercise, e.g., "Many ESL students avoid to do their assignments until the last minute. This is something that they cannot afford doing" (for example, Anson and Schwegler). A few handbooks include somewhat more open-ended tasks that are designed to increase learners' practice of new forms, e.g., *Write a two-page story using at least five two-part verbs* (for example, Hult and Huckin). Only rarely do handbooks provide any extended practice, such as in multi-paragraph writing or editing, and still more rarely, any practice situated within the context of the students' own writing.

Second language material in handbooks is likely to be consulted at two junctures: when introducing some structure or convention and at the point of error, which is probably more frequently the case. The question then becomes, do the three types of material—rules, examples, and decontextualized exercises—help learners to become better writers, either as a result of exposure to novel grammatical input or of error correction? The answer is not clear cut, but there is a fair amount of evidence from second language acquisition research suggesting that often they do not, but under the right conditions, with the right material, it is possible.

To begin, of the three types of material, rule provision tends to be the longest and most frequent in most handbooks. Even if we assume that being shown or told a rule leads to knowledge of the rule, there is ample evidence that rule knowledge is no guarantee of correct rule application (see Alderson et al.; Green and Hecht; Hulstijn and Hulstijn). Thus, in general, the bulk of what is presented in handbooks, when they are used as a self-access reference, may be ineffective in increasing learners' accuracy in writing. There are some occasions when learners may find a handbook helpful as a reference tool. This is particularly likely if learners are aware that there is a gap in their knowledge of English. Merrill Swain and Sharon Lapkin have demonstrated that when learners

become aware of such gaps, they often take positive steps to fill them (373). However, this scenario assumes that the learner is aware of the gap, that the problem is easily corrigible, and that the information is easily accessible in the handbook. We suspect that most grammatical difficulties encountered by ESL writers do not approach this ideal.

What of error correction more generally? If a grammatical error is pointed out to a learner, with a symbol or other flag, with reference to some explanation or examples in a handbook, would that be helpful? Unfortunately, here too, there is a long list of studies of second language writing that suggests feedback on error and additional grammar and editing instruction, as commonly practiced, do not significantly affect subsequent linguistic accuracy (Polio, Fleck, and Leder; and Truscott). In spite of the lack of empirical support for grammar instruction and error correction in the writing classroom, the practice remains widespread. However, as Charlene Polio, Catherine Fleck and Nevin Leder point out, "these studies should not be taken as evidence that grammar correction is theoretically ineffective; rather, these studies merely show that grammar correction *as practiced* is ineffective" (60, emphasis added). In their study, the practice was typical of what is found in ESL sections of handbooks, namely, grammar review and editing exercises.

Some argue that it is simply a matter of finding the right way to go about integrating grammar instruction and feedback into the writing process (Byrd and Reid; Ferris and Hedgcock; Ferris, "Case"). In "Teaching Students to Self-Edit," Dana Ferris suggests one approach, in which learners learn to self-edit. She has yet to publish empirical support for this technique, but it has considerable face validity for two reasons: First, it is a *process* that must be learned and practiced, not a set of rules to be memorized, a perspective that has support outside of the field of second language writing in Constance Weaver's T*eaching Grammar in Context*, for example. Ferris's approach to teaching editing skills is far more involved and time-consuming than referring learners to a page in a handbook. Second, it is practiced in the context of the students' own writing, something that handbook-use cannot easily accommodate. A similar approach is advocated by Jane Cogie, Kim Strain and Sharon Lorinskas, for use with ESL writers in writing centers, where learners receive one-on-one tutoring help (21-23). They, too, advocate a process of increasing error awareness and identification, followed by self-editing, but above all, transferring as much responsibility as possible to the learner. However, they also stress that this is not an overnight transformation; it is a process that takes time and, often, collaborative effort. Finally, an important feature of these approaches

is that they are immediate, taking place while the writer's attention is on expressing meaning. The approaches are an integrated part of the writing process, not dislocated feedback or exercises separated from the writing process in both time and intention.

Given the complexity of teaching both writing skills and assisting ESL writers in their development towards target-like linguistic accuracy, what sorts of tasks could bolster the role that handbooks play in this process? In order to make such a determination, it is important to distinguish among the types of rules that contribute to linguistic accuracy. Teachers need to understand the type of structure or error they are trying to change if their intervention is to be effective. With the full knowledge that we are simplifying this issue, we will distinguish among three types of rules and the errors that learners often make in trying to follow them.

First, there are many rules that learners may "know." Recurrent errors in the use of these rules are particularly frustrating to teachers. What we mean by "know" is that learners have either partial or complete knowledge of how the grammatical subsystem works, yet they seem not to have adequate control over their knowledge and continue to make errors. Ellen Bialystok and Michael Sharwood Smith have distinguished between linguistic knowledge, or competence, and control of that knowledge (101). They claim that it is varying control over knowledge that can explain why a learner's performance is inconsistent. Much of the work that is done on ESL grammar in writing classrooms is in an effort to increase learner control over their developing knowledge of target grammatical rules. Thus, the two crucial features of this rule type is that learners already have at least partial understanding of it and that knowledge of how one form works can be extended to related forms; in short, that it is part of a grammatical system.

Examples of this first type of rule include agreement, participial adjectives (e.g., *interested* vs. *interesting*), and many rules for verb tense choice. For example, if an ESL writer is having trouble with tense, the teacher first needs to identify the type of problem. It might be tense switching, misunderstanding the application of a tense (e.g., what context is appropriate for the use of present perfect) or simply failing to mark tense at all (e.g., "The scientist conclude that the experiment fail for two reasons."). The contrastive analysis provided in some handbooks can offer a place for teachers to start, but more importantly, they must also look for patterns in each student's writing. Furthermore, although all of these errors relate to tense, they are not the same. For example, it is likely that consistent failure to mark tense is a control problem; this means that ESL writers can quickly correct these errors if their attention

is drawn to them. However, a learner may simply not understand all the nuances of say, progressive aspect. This is an issue of the development of linguistic knowledge rather than increasing control over structures that have already been acquired .

Once the problem has been identified as a control problem, then the teacher can begin to deal directly with the student. Some grammatical explanation may be called for, but the metalanguage in most handbooks may compound the problem rather than alleviate it. The teacher may need to interpret the information in the handbook for the student. Following a grammatical explanation, many handbooks provide sentence-level drills. We cannot emphasize enough the ineffectiveness of these drills. As ESL teachers know and many composition teachers quickly discover, ESL writers are often experts at the sentence level drill but this has no apparent effect on their writing. The same observation has been made for writers in their first language (Hartwell).

Despite these problems, handbooks can improve their effectiveness in increasing learner control over rules they know. This can be accomplished with the greater use of two kinds of activities: contextualized exercises and error correction strategies. Contextualized exercises are multi-paragraph essays filled with a specific error, such as a verb tense problem, that students can find and correct. Some handbooks do contain editing exercises, but rarely are they longer than a paragraph. Longer passages that require students to think about how one sentence affects another are feasible in handbooks. If ESL writers first work their way through such an essay, finding and correcting the errors, and then discuss the reasoning for their corrections with their teacher or classmates, it may be that they can then work more successfully on finding and correcting the same type of error in their own work. Applying what they know to their own work is a crucial step that bridges the gap between handbook exercises and writing accurately. This task may be beyond the bounds of the handbook itself, but the handbook can lay the groundwork for it.

The second important component of this process of finding and correcting errors is the development of error correction strategies. In order for ESL writers to have success at editing their own work, they cannot simply be given an exercise like the one above and be told to correct it. Rather, they must have a clear way to identify errors and apply rules to the essay, and ultimately, their own writing. For each grammar problem, a strategy to find and correct errors is crucial. Handbooks seem by their nature to lend themselves to this element of grammar instruction. Before students work on the contextualized exercises or their own work, they must have a method to approach each problem.

Teachers may think of them as activities students can do independently, but if students are to use this process, initially, it must be guided and modeled by the teacher.

Error correction strategies work best when they can be applied first to a contextualized exercise and then to students' own writing. It is important to note here that the following strategies assume some knowledge on the part of the students. For example, to find tense errors, a learner needs to be able to identify finite verbs. This is no simple task, and some students may need preparation before they are able to complete an exercise like this one. The crucial element of a successful error correction strategy is that it must provide writers with a point of entry to the text. They must begin the process with something they *can* do and then move systematically from there to what they need to find and change. Not every exercise will work for every student but if the learners are ready, this process can be effective.

An error correction strategy can consist of a relatively simple list of steps which could easily follow the grammatical explanations and examples already present in handbooks. To work on tense shifting on unmarked verbs, the steps would be quite basic:

1. Underline all the finite verbs.

2. For each verb: Does the action or event that is described take place in the present or the past?

    a. If the action or event is in the present, is there a present tense verb? If the tense is incorrect, change it to present.

    b. If the action or event is in the past, is there a past tense verb? If the tense is incorrect, change it to past.

The point of entry in this case is the identification of finite verbs. When learners locate the verb, they have also located the point of potential error and can proceed to use the guidelines provided. This process may seem mechanical to teachers, who are often more comfortable with writing as a creative process and respond to grammatical questions intuitively. The problem is that ESL writers may not have the same intuitions; their grammatical processing is not automatic even though, at some level, they "know" the grammar point in question. The level of accuracy demanded in college courses may require that they use a slower and more mechanical method of reducing errors of this type. These steps can help ESL writers bridge the gap between learning the rule and applying it in their own writing.

A second area of difficulty is one in which handbooks may have a more limited role. There are many aspects of language that are seen as grammatical rules, yet they more closely resemble the lexicon in the manner in which they are learned. They are not particularly systematic and, in lay terms, they simply have to be memorized. In contrast to the first type of rule, which involves *system learning,* this type of rule involves *item learning,* or learning one item at a time.

One example that comes to mind quickly is prepositions. Why do we live *on* a street but *at* an address? There is no particular reason. Handbooks make a useful reference book for these kinds of rules. Or if, for instance, learners know that a certain verb must be followed by either a gerund or infinitive, but they don't know which, most handbooks have accessible charts, lists and tables to consult. Contextualized exercises may not be feasible for these because the forms do not occur with enough frequency in natural writing to allow for one of effective length. However, error correction strategies may still be useful. And, although we stand by our assertion that error correction strategies work best when used first with contextualized exercises and then students' writing, they still have benefits when used with these rules that require item learning. In conjunction with the charts, lists, and tables that handbooks already provide, error correction strategies help draw ESL writers' attention to a difficult structure, aid memorization, and develop the practice of looking up answers when they are unsure of their choice. For instance, the choice of a gerund or infinitive following a finite verb lends itself to a simple error correction strategy that ESL writers can use to check their own writing. As in the earlier example of verb tense, the entry point is the ability to identify finite verbs, as well as, in this case, the ability to identify auxiliary and modal verbs.

1. Check every sentence. In each one, are there two or more verbs together? If so, continue to Step 2.

2. Is the first sentence in the group an auxiliary or modal verb? If it is **not** an auxiliary or modal verb, continue to Step 3.

3. Underline the first verb and check your handbook or learner dictionary to see whether it should be followed by a gerund or infinitive. Make sure you have used the correct form.

Other rules in this group, such as for preposition use, are less likely candidates even for error correction strategies. Handbooks do generally break preposition usage down into manageable chunks, such as prepositions of time (*at* 3:30 p.m.) or place (*on* Clark Street, *at* home,

in school). They may even provide lists of prepositions that commonly occur with specific nouns, verbs and adjectives. The fact is, however, that because there are so many possibilities in natural language for prepositional use, there is no clear entry point that ESL writers can use to locate potential errors. Unlike the earlier examples of verb tense or gerunds and infinitives, simple error correction strategies that would apply to ESL writing are virtually impossible to create. Although the examples and lists of prepositions in handbooks may be of some use as a reference for more advanced ESL writers, learner dictionaries may be a more logical choice. The contexts for preposition choice that tend to be most difficult for ESL writers are those that are dictated by the noun, verb or adjective preceding it. ESL writers can look up those words in a learner dictionary and see which prepositions follow them and in what context. This is a more efficient method than checking through lists or charts in handbooks.

Increasing learner control over knowledge, as in our first example, and providing a reference to aid item learning, as in our second example, are very different goals from trying to actually change learner knowledge through system learning. This is a far more difficult and time-consuming endeavor. Second language acquisition, that is, the development of new and systematic knowledge, takes time, lots of time. As we have stated, simply providing the learners with a handbook of rules that they are not yet ready to acquire is unlikely to have much effect on most learners. This is particularly true of late-learned, complex grammatical systems, such as modal verbs or articles. In these cases, handbooks may also play a role, but again, probably a limited one, depending on writers' proficiency level and their willingness to invest the time and energy necessary to achieve accuracy with these more complex and difficult structures.

Articles are one good example of this type of structure. When ESL writers are given the rules for article use, they are often overwhelmed by their complexity and apparent capriciousness. Two suggestions may be helpful here. First, article use is easier to understand in a context larger than an individual sentence, so it makes sense to provide examples that are not limited to isolated sentences. Second, although article rules are indeed complex, the rules can be broken down into manageable subrules and applied by learners willing to take the time to use them. If teachers and students focus on these consistently and use an error correction strategy, article errors can be greatly reduced. The strategy obviously would involve more steps than the ones we presented for past tense, perhaps more of a flowchart than a list (for examples, see Master 470; Raimes, *Exploring* 279), but taken step by step, this can be

manageable for many ESL writers. Handbooks can certainly provide this kind of flowchart as well as much longer, contextualized examples of article use.

It is important to reiterate that although we are advocating similar strategies in the tense and article examples, the underlying processes are not the same. In the case of non-marking of tense, we have argued that these activities increase learners' control of existing knowledge, whereas in the article example, the intention is to develop knowledge of the target through rule explanation and use. We have already noted that the efficacy of the latter is by no means proven. Nevertheless, diligent ESL writers may apply the rules, in some cases, without necessarily having acquired them, thus increasing the accuracy of their writing. It is likely that only the most dedicated will do so because relying on mechanical rule application rather than intuition is incredibly labor intensive.

Handbooks will not be useful for all the rules in this group. Modal verbs, for example, are also extremely complex. The basic uses of modals, such as *permission*, *possibility, obligation*, and *ability,* are usually addressed in handbooks. What is often missing, however, is how modals can also reflect writers' emotions or their relationship to their audience. For example, a sentence such as "The government must do something about global warming immediately" could be a well-supported conclusion by a scientific authority or an emotional call to action from a politician. Both writers might express obligation but for different reasons. Most handbooks do not provide such context, and indeed, it is almost impossible for handbooks to cover all the nuances of modals. These cannot be neatly laid out in a list or chart. Nor do they lend themselves to contextualized exercises or error correction strategies. Modals certainly can be acquired and instruction may aid in their acquisition, but handbooks by their nature do not seem to be the place to look for substantial help in learning new structures with this level of complexity. Neither learners nor their teachers should expect handbook use to stand in for the long and difficult process of second language learning.

In general, simply giving ESL writers a handbook for their own use, or even assigning independent work in a handbook, will not guarantee that their writing will improve. Nevertheless, handbooks can play a role in helping ESL writers to improve the grammatical accuracy of their writing. The effectiveness of handbooks could be enhanced considerably if they were to include activities that are more closely tied to students' writing. Writing teachers can also help ESL students to use handbooks more intelligently if they understand the differences among various

types of grammatical rules and the processes that learners go through in acquiring them. Table 1 summarizes the differences among these rules and the manner in which we believe handbooks can assist learners toward target-like use of them.

Table 1. The role of handbooks in responding to various types of ESL writers' errors.

Type of Error	Example	Handbook activities/resources	Alternative resources
Control errors ·	Subject-verb agreement	* Contextualized exercises * Error correction strategies	
Item learning errors			
* Point of entry ·	Gerund vs. infinitive	* Reference charts * Error correction strategies	Learner dictionaries
* No point of entry	Prepositions		Learner dictionaries
System learning errors			
· · ·	* articles * modal use unlikely	* Flow charts * Multi-paragraph contextualized examples * Error correction strategies	

Notes

[1] We would like to thank Elizabeth Burmester for her valuable suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

[2] Since our focus is local accuracy, we acknowledge without comment the continuing debate over the efficacy and appropriateness of the presentation and instruction in handbooks on other aspects of the writing process (See Janangelo for a review).

[3] The handbooks cited here are simply a representative sample, not an exhaustive survey.

[4] The term *convention* is the more commonly used term in composition studies; applied linguists still tend to favor the term *rule*.

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