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# Subliminal Correction Strategies of Student Composition in the Bilingual First Grade Classroom: A Personal Guideline

Margaret Jean Watral-Chavez

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Subliminal Correction Strategies of Student Composition in  
the Bilingual First Grade Classroom: A Personal Guideline

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts  
in Teaching degree at the School for International Training, Brattleboro,  
Vermont.

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This project by Margaret Jean Watral-Chávez is accepted in its present form.

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Abstract:

This is a personal paper in which I address the delicate topic of correction strategies within the realm of student composition as they were applied specifically to a bilingual, Spanish/English, first grade classroom located at the El Mirage Elementary School of El Mirage, Arizona.

I begin the paper with a statement of what are my personal assumptions in regard to what I call "subliminal" correction strategies as they relate to a language experience approach to teaching. I have supported these personal assumptions by developing ten "subliminal" correction strategies which have already been successfully implemented in my first grade classroom. The paper concludes with another personal statement on what I have learned from my research and its practical application.

Although this is an original paper, I have attached a list of references which I consider to be relevant to my study and which might prove to be useful to an interested reader who might wish to expand beyond my research.

ERIC Descriptors: Bilingual Students, Elementary School Teachers, Language Arts, Language Experience Approach, Student Educational Objectives, Teaching Methods, Writing (Composition)

I would especially like to thank my  
husband, Rubén Medina Chávez, for all  
of the patience and understanding he  
has shown me throughout this past,  
oftentimes difficult, year.

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## Introduction

1. Get the children writing.
2. Get the children reading.
3. Encourage the children to experience their language without fear or apprehension.
4. Allow the children to think freely and creatively with their language.
5. Help the children. Guide them and correct them throughout their language experiences in such a way so as to never hinder what is innately theirs: a natural progression of language development.

These are the five basic premises on which my personal, first-hand study of primary level, correction strategies of student composition is based.

Within the field of children's language development, I believe that language skills are learned and acquired "holistically." Reading, as a language skill, cannot be separated from writing; writing, another fundamental language arts skill, cannot be separated from oral/aural language development; and these three language arts skills should be integrated with studies in science, mathematics, social studies, art, music, physical education, etc.

A child's language development is part of his/her holistic maturation process and throughout this academic growth process, a child should be free of what might be considered burdensome, hindering correction strategies which could ultimately abate their creative, natural language learning processes.

And so, I begin my personal study on "subliminal," child-centered

correction strategies as they have been developed and implemented in a first grade, bilingual classroom (Spanish/English) of the El Mirage Elementary School located in El Mirage, Arizona.

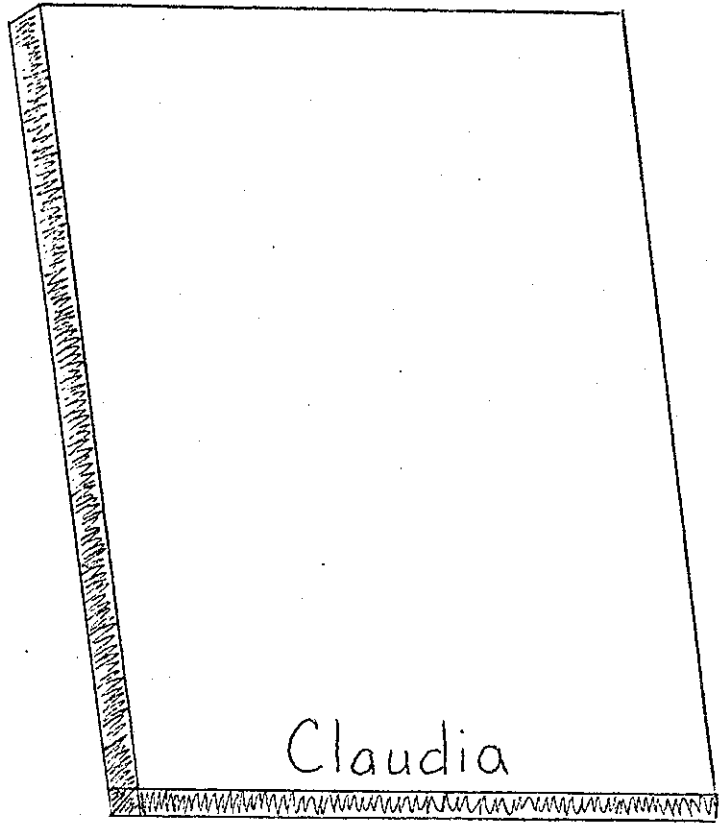


1. "Star Words" - "Palabras Estreladas:"

If a classroom creates a non-threatening, freely flowing environment, students should be able to extract proper word spellings from increased experience with print. A student's list of "star words" provides him/her with a group of correctly spelled words which are important to him/her and which have been presented to him/her in an open and non-threatening manner.

Each student receives a tagboard star with an attached ring. (See accompanying diagrams.) On a daily basis a small group of students meet with the teacher or teacher's aide. They meet in the group equipped with their stars, pencils, and individual "star words" notebooks. During this time period the students are given the opportunity to learn any one word which may interest him/her on that particular day. The teacher then writes the correctly spelled word on a strip of ruled tagboard which is cut at the end of the word, has a hole punched out on one end, and is then placed on the student's ring. The students review their words with the teacher and are then asked to copy their words correctly into their "star words" notebooks. (If time permits, the students may further emphasize the correctly spelled words that they have learned by illustrating them in their notebooks.) The students in the group are given the same opportunity to learn the spellings of additional words since they are encouraged to listen and watch each other while their new words are being spelled in an effort to have them leave the session having learned more than just one correctly spelled word.

Each day the students read through their groups of "star words" and must be able to do so successfully before being allowed to earn another word. Throughout the course of the school day, the students are encouraged to use their "star words" during their various writing exercises.



1. chocolate

2. gallina

3. burro

- 1. chocolate
- 2. chicken/hen
- 3. donkey

"Star words" provide the students with the immediate correct spelling of words in an effort to establish sound spelling patterns which might be applied to other words as well. For example, Spanish speaking children often spell the word "gallina" or "chicken" incorrectly. They will hear the diphthong/ai/ rather than the /y/ of the letter (ll) and, thus spell the word /gaina/ rather than correctly as (gallina.) Not only will "star words" give the students the correct spelling of "gallina," it will also begin to set a pattern for similarly spelled words such as the pronoun "she" or "ella" spelled as (ella) and not /eia/. In other cases such as with the words "donkey" or "burro" and "cow" or "vaca," both words begin with a /b/ which in Spanish can be spelled either with a (b) or a (v.) "Star words" can help to provide a distinction which might otherwise be confused; e.g., "cow" is spelled (vaca) and not /baca/; similarly, "donkey" is spelled (burro) and not /vufo/.

"Star words" in no way interfere with a student's right to work with experimental spellings during the course of the day's writing activities. What they do provide during a given class period are correctly spelled words introduced within a non-threatening environment which can begin to help serve as a base for each student's individualized language development process.

## 2. Class Storywriting:

A class storywriting activity not only provides the students with further examples of correctly spelled words, it also helps to incorporate many students' creative thinking capacities as well as provide them with a beginning look at basic grammar; e.g., a sentence begins with a capital letter, ends with a period, and every story has a title.

The exercise begins with the teacher explaining to the students that they are going to write one story as a whole class. It should be emphasized that the students will be providing the ideas for the story and that the teacher will mainly serve as a secretary who transfers the students' ideas directly from their mouths to the blackboard.

The exercise begins by the class deciding on a title for the story. The teacher accepts five title ideas from the class which are written up on the blackboard. The students are then instructed to vote for the title which they like best; they may vote once and only once. The title which receives the most votes naturally wins and is written at the top, center part of the blackboard and becomes the chosen title for the story.

The students now begin the actual writing of the story. Again, the teacher asks for ideas, in sentence form, from the students. As each student provides a sentence the teacher asks the rest of the class if they are in agreement and if they are, the teacher writes the sentence on the blackboard below the title. (By asking the whole class for its collaboration on each sentence, the teacher is further emphasizing the idea of a whole class storywriting.) The teacher continues to elicit sentences from the class until there are about four or five sentences on the blackboard.

Once the story has been completed, the teacher asks the class if they have any questions about anything that has been written on the blackboard. Once all questions have been answered, the story is reread aloud singularly by the teacher and then chorally by the class. Afterwards, the students are instructed to copy the story onto "storywriting paper." (See accompanying diagram.) The students then illustrate the story according to their own personal interpretations.

The primary emphasis during a class storywriting activity is on developing a cooperative group effort which will expose the students to proper

# El Gato Con Botas

(Dibujo)

El gato toma leche. El gato duerme en  
cama. El gato se sube al caballo. Al gato le  
gusta comer ratones.

# The Cat with Boots

(Illustration)

The cat drinks milk. The cat sleeps in  
his bed. The cat climbs up onto his horse.  
The cat likes to eat mice.

spellings and correct, basic grammatical constructions. Working as a group is openly welcomed on occasion as this alleviates the feeling of pressure from any one student and allows all of the students to joyfully experiment with language as a group with support not only from their teacher, but also from their peers.

### 3. Individual Conferencing:

More often than not, it is difficult for a teacher to meet individually with each student every day and attend to his/her unique needs because as is usually the case in most public schools, classes are great in number and the academic day is limited in hours. Yet I feel that it is extremely important that a teacher meet individually with each student on some type of regular basis. I set aside one afternoon, once a week for "individual conferences" during which time I try to attend to each student's personal needs and problems.

On the first day that conferencing is to take place the rules of the process are introduced; specifically, under no circumstances must any student interrupt me while I am in conference with another student. Any questions must be directed to a neighboring student or must wait until between conference times. While I am meeting individually with students, the rest of the class has been given "seatwork" to complete which reviews material that has been covered that week during regular class activities.

During the individual conferences, I try to make each student feel as comfortable and as non-threatened as possible. During the conference times, I engage the students in some aspect of a language arts activity. Each conference tends to last about ten minutes and the child knows that during that time, he/she has my complete, undivided attention.

As a student begins to read or write it is natural that he/she may make some errors along the way. At this time, I openly make corrections as gently as I can while at the same time praising him/her for a job well done and thanking him/her for at least trying. Verbal corrections are phrased in the form of a suggestion in an effort to have the student determine what needs to be corrected. Written corrections are made above, below, or next to a child's work with a lead pencil. Corrections are never written directly over a student's effort because that would distort his/her work and change it from his/hers to that of the teacher. Any type of colored pencil is never used so as to prevent the student from feeling that the teacher has merely established his/her authority in red or blue rather than helping him/her along the path to better work in the future.

During the individual conference time, there exists an overall air of cooperation and understanding within the classroom as all of the students know that I have put my trust and confidence in them to do their seatwork quietly at their own pace so that when the time comes for their individual conferences, they will also be guaranteed my complete attention. Throughout the afternoon of individual conferencing, "subliminal" correction strategies are occurring and the students are able to readily accept these corrections as a matter of course because of the comfortable, non-threatening classroom atmosphere which exists.

#### 4. Word and Sentence Learning Centers:

Learning centers allow for the continual reinforcement of material already learned while at the same time encouraging students to apply what they have learned to new situations and activities. Two of the most successful learning centers which I have implemented in the classroom are a

"word center" and a "sentence center." (See accompanying diagrams.)

Towards the beginning of the school year the "word center" is first implemented. At the center the students are given a group of pictures and a group of words written on strips of ruled tagboard along with a lined, pre-numbered ditto sheet. Their task at the center is quite simple: they must read each word, match it with its accompanying picture, and then copy each word on the ditto provided. Matching the word with a picture shows comprehension of the material which has been decoded by the student. Copying the word on another sheet of paper reinforces the word and its proper spelling. The words chosen for the center are words which the students often come across in their basal readers; as well, they are often words which the students have misspelled in their journals or in their other daily writing activities. At all times, corrections are occurring but, again, "subliminally" so that the student is learning in a self-discovering, non-threatening manner.

As students begin to show considerable proficiency in their work at the "word center," the "sentence center" is then introduced. The "sentence center" naturally presents another distinct challenge to the students as they are now asked to read a group of related words and derive meaning from them as a whole. At the center, the students are presented three sentences written on ruled tagboard strips and two pre-lined ditto sheets. (See accompanying diagrams.) The first task is for the students to read each sentence and then copy them onto the writing paper. Assuming that the students have understood each sentence, they then must illustrate each sentence individually on the other ditto sheet. The teacher decides whether or not there has been adequate comprehension during the "checking process" which occurs when the student claims to have completed his work in the center. The student is asked to describe each of his illustrations so the teacher knows immediately which sentence it represents and whether





## Sentence Learning Center:

Nombre _____	Fecha _____
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____

Nombre _____
Fecha _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

El pato nada en el agua.

(The duck swims in the water.)

Una nube tapa la luna.

(A cloud covers the moon.)

Susana toma leche.

(Susan drinks milk.)

or not the sentences were understood by the student. Again, the sentences chosen for the center represent phrases or sentences encountered in the students' basal readers or take into consideration writing errors which have been made during other language arts activities.

Throughout the course of the students' efforts in the "word center" and in the "sentence center" corrections are being made "subliminally" by the teacher and outwardly by the students. The emphasis is on trying to make students recognize their mistakes and correct them through the help of the learning centers. These self-corrections made by the students can then later be applied to their other language arts learning tasks elsewhere in the classroom.

#### 5. Accidental Corrections:

It is beneficial to the students if the teacher lets them know that he/she also makes mistakes sometimes. There are times when a teacher honestly makes a mistake but other times a bit of humility should be exhibited so that the students may also learn from their teacher's mistakes and not always just from their own.

The process by which this done is quite simple. The teacher incorrectly spells a word as he/she writes it on the blackboard and then asks the class if there is anything wrong with the word. This process can be extremely beneficial when dealing with fine line phonemic points or with letter writing reversals. For example, at the beginning stages of reading the Spanish speaking child has great difficulty distinguishing between the sounds /n/ and /l/, /p/ and /b/, and /r/ and /r̄/. Those students who have problems distinguishing among these groups of sounds would benefit from an "accidental correction" activity; e.g., the teacher intends to

write the word "nadie" or "no one" but instead first writes it on the blackboard as (ladie.) When the teacher asks the students if there is anything wrong with the word, some of the faster students are bound to shout out the correct letter and, so, the teacher might say, "I'm sorry, you're correct. It should be /n/, (nadie) and not /l/, (ladie.)" At the beginning stages of writing, Spanish and English speaking children have great difficulty with letter reversals when writing (b) and (d) or (p) and (q). Similarly, a teacher might write the word "burro" or "donkey" on the blackboard as (durro) and then ask the children if there is anything wrong with it. If the teacher insists the pronunciation is /bu<sup>o</sup>ro/ but continues to point to the written word (durro), one or more students are bound to soon realize that the teacher mistakenly wrote a (d) for a (b).

This activity can also be extended to activities that the students themselves are engaged in at the blackboard. When a student is called on by the teacher to write a word or sentence on the blackboard and does so incorrectly, another student can then be called upon by the teacher to go to the blackboard to "help" the other student. The word "help" should be emphasized so that the student who made the error will not feel threatened by the correction and will, instead, be open-minded enough to internalize the correction once it has been made.

#### 6. Directed, Generalized Corrections:

Once a day, for about twenty to thirty minutes, the students are required to write in their journals. They are instructed that they may write anything that they wish. At the beginning of the year they may only write single letters or copy words off of printed material found around the classroom, but they know that this is acceptable just so long as they are

engaged in the writing process. Gradually they are weaned away from these most basic, often purely hand/eye coordination exercises, and encouraged to write words and to make progressions into expressing whole ideas through sentences. The students are free to experiment with spellings as they wish. Again, they are being encouraged to explore freely the marvels of language as a means of expression.

While the students are writing in their journals, I am very reluctant about making direct corrections in their journals because markings in their books tend to take away from the originality and authenticity of their efforts; however, often the same writing errors are consistently made. For example, the word "y" or "and" is often misspelled as (i), "fue" or "he/she went" is written as /fwe/, and the pronoun "nosotros" or "we" is misspelled as /nojotros/, and "mucho" or "many/a lot of" is written as /muncho/. Although experimental spellings are encouraged in the classroom, I feel that many of the spelling errors that are made should not be totally ignored. Too much freedom in spelling may lead to poor writing habits which are not easily broken at a later date. However, teacher corrections in the area of journal writing must be delicately handled so that students will continue to experiment with their writing and not fall back under the optimum security blanket of writing only those things which they can spell correctly.

As I walk around the classroom reading the daily entries of the students (or having them read to me by them) I take a mental inventory of some of the most common errors that are being made. When I feel that the students are fairly engaged in their writing for the day, I begin to bring some "correction ideas" to their attention.

The technique that I use is as follows. I call for the students' attentions as I move to the blackboard. I write an incorrectly spelled word on the blackboard and say the word asking the class if it is correct-

ly spelled. The students look at the word and work it through orally until they have arrived at the correct spelling. I ask them to look carefully at the word and to study it so that they will remember the proper spelling when they need to use the word again in the future.

#### 7. Spelling Lists:

Spelling lists present another way of introducing writing corrections within a safe, non-threatening learning environment. They represent an important part of the language learning process because they not only present young students with a precise, error free aspect of written language, they also represent a means of easy success for the student who has a good memory for spelling and for the "lazy student" who is not as willing to explore language through experimental spellings and some degree of risk taking.

Spelling lists in no way hinder a student's liberty to experiment with his/her language during his/her other writing exercises that take place over the course of a school day. The time spent on spelling lists requires only ten to fifteen minutes of the full morning time span which is usually monopolized by language arts activities. It is only during this time that a student is controlled to write exactly what is written without exception or question.

In the beginning stages of the first grade, the daily spelling lists are short, usually three words of one or two syllables. These lists may increase in number and in syllables as the school year advances and as the students show sufficient progress. Each word is presented one at a time. The students are instructed to write nothing at first on their papers. They are merely observing the words that are being written on the blackboard and studying their spellings and formations. Once all of the words have been

presented, they are given a few minutes to look at them and study them before they are erased from the blackboard. Once they have been erased, the teacher calls on students to come up to the front of the class and write the words one at a time on the blackboard. As they do this, the other students are observing from their desks for possible errors and necessary corrections. Once the spelling words have been successfully rewritten on the blackboard by the students, the words are once again erased and the students are now instructed to write the words on their papers. As the students write the words in their spelling books, the teacher passes through the aisles looking at the students' work praising them for words that are correctly spelled and helping them to correct any words that are misspelled. The spelling corrections are geared towards eliciting the corrections from the students. For example, one child writes the word "tienda" or "store" as (tenda.) The teacher would read the child's spelling of the word "tienda" back to him phonetically as he has written it, /tenda/, and then reemphasizes the correct pronunciation of the word and asks the student for the missing sound and for what correction he/she needs to make. The teacher should not simply correct the word because a great deal of valuable learning would stand to be lost if the child were not allowed to make his own correction. Often the student will find the error but when he/she does not, the teacher will ask for a volunteer to go to the blackboard and write the word that the other student has misspelled. From the correctly written word, the other student will derive what needs to be changed and then be able to correct his/her misspelled word. The major emphasis throughout the spelling exercise is to get the students to write a set of given words correctly and when they do not do this, they are to find their own errors and then make the corrections themselves.

#### 8. Editing:

Editing is a correction strategy which would be implemented at mid-year or at a later date when the students have become more confident and less inhibited about their writing abilities. Editing is meant to be done on a one to one basis between the teacher and the student and, therefore, is a somewhat time consuming process.

The basic premise behind editing is self-correction by the student of his/her written work. The editing process takes place confidentially between the teacher and the student without any additional outside interruptions or influences.

The teacher assigns a writing topic to the student which he then proceeds to begin work on and to complete. The teacher explains that what he/she is writing is a "rough draft" and not a "final copy;" Therefore, the student should not be too overly concerned about producing a perfect piece of work the first time around. The teacher then reads the student's first draft and sets a time to meet with the student for an editing session.

During the editing session the teacher helps the student develop a cleaner copy of the first draft. They discuss spelling corrections, punctuation alterations, and better phrasing possibilities. The teacher must remember at all times that the student is the one who must ultimately be in control of his/her written work and the final product that is finally produced. The teacher's primary role is one of a facilitator who spends most of the editing session asking questions such as:

1. How do you feel about the spelling of this word?
2. Have you remembered to include all necessary punctuation marks?
3. Is there a way to rephrase your statement to make it flow better and more evenly?
4. Can you join these two sentences to make one?
5. What other word might you use to describe \_\_\_\_\_ ?



Often more than one editing session will be needed to produce a final written piece that the student is happy with. The teacher must constantly remind the student that editing is an important part of the writing process which will help him/her create a tighter, more precise representation of his/her ideas, opinions, and feelings about a given subject. He must not become discouraged if the final product takes longer in emerging than he/she had anticipated.

#### 9. Writing with the Children:

Young children tend to admire their teacher in a similar way that they love and look up to their parents. When a student leaves his home in the morning and travels to the classroom, he accepts a new ultimate authority figure in his/her teacher who, in turn, learns to act as somewhat of a parental figure in terms of caring for the student and nurturing his/her intelligence over the course of a normal school day.

Due to this strong admiration created by the student for his/her teacher, he/she tends to separate himself/herself from the teacher by looking up to him/her for all of the answers to a multitude of questions he/she brings to school daily. The teacher then takes a seat on a lofty pedestal in the student's eyes because the teacher is special, well-dressed, well-groomed, and seemingly knowledgeable about everything.

Some teachers enjoy this ultimate feeling of authority; in fact, some almost crave it. Others, especially those teachers who try to educate through "holistic" means, do not necessarily need nor aspire to this feeling of greatness which their students tend to bestow on them. They need only what all other teachers must also have and that is enough authority to keep the classroom in sufficient order to assure that all children are having at least an equal opportunity to learn and prosper throughout their

academic day. More authority than this is most likely not needed and could ultimately be detrimental to a young child's overall learning process.

One way a teacher might correct this unnecessary preconception of the "teacher as supreme" that students create is to do more with them. The teacher should not merely tell the children to play, he/she should play with them sometimes. He/she should read more with them and not just to them. He/she should let the students see him/her using mathematics. The teacher should write with the students and show his/her students that he/she, too, has a use for the written language. The teacher should share with the students what he/she has to say. Student self-corrections will come partially from what they see their teacher doing. The teacher should let the students learn with him/her and not just from him/her. A good teacher will give his/her students a reason to believe that what they are learning is not just a school requirement but, rather, a necessary and important tool for their everyday living. A teacher of young primary grade children must be able to look at a student and read into their eyes for their desires and needs. In essence, the teacher must become a student/child and share with his/her students in order to establish the bond of trust needed for corrections to become non-threatening and for their educations to truly prosper and flourish.

#### 10. Outward and Honest Corrections:

For all of the times a teacher will try to elicit a correction from a student, there will still be other times when a student will need direct and honest answers from the teacher. Many times a young student will look at his/her teacher with frustrated eyes that seem to be saying, "Please, just tell me the answer this one time. I just do not know what the answer

to your question is or where the problem in my efforts stem from. Please do not make me figure it out because I simply do not know."

A teacher of young children must be able to figure out when a student can help himself/herself with a given correction and when a student will need the direct input of a teacher to guide his/her corrections and to give the young student further direction. There will be times when a student will write the word "por" or "for" as /bor/ and will not be able to discover for himself/herself that he/she must change the /b/ to /p/ because to him/her they sound the same; they are, in fact, the same.

I think when we were all children we had at least one teacher who told us to look up a word in the dictionary if we wanted to know how it was spelled. Can you really look up the spelling of a word if you do not know how it is spelled? Can a child really be expected to write a word differently from the way he/she says it? Contrarily, can a child be expected to read a word and pronounce it differently from the way it appears in print? The answer to any of these questions should be most definitely, no. None of these things can be expected of a young student without the guidance of an individual trained or experienced enough to aid them through their decoding efforts.

Many times a young student will be able to recognize his/her errors and sometimes even correct them, but other times he/she will not be able to do either of these two things. The teacher must be able to distinguish between his/her two roles as facilitator and mentor and decide how each of these roles can best be used and when.

### Conclusion

When dealing with correction strategies in the primary grade level classroom, we must never forget that we are dealing with children. Children, especially as students, are extremely delicate individuals and must be treated as such. Under no circumstances must a teacher risk using a correction strategy that will inhibit a child's natural language learning process or threaten him/her as an individual with all of his/her unique talents and strengths.

A basic list of teacher rules when considering corrections of students' compositions might include the following:

1. Never forget that you are dealing with children.
2. Do not put children on the spot in front of their peers in any situation that could be considered threatening to his/her overall academic growth.
3. Each student is a unique individual and should be treated as such.
4. Remind students that the teacher is not infallible.
5. Students should not be afraid to make mistakes as they stand to learn a great deal from them.
6. Never destroy student work with unnecessary pen markings.
7. Always strive for continual progress to avoid boredom and loss of interest.
8. The teacher should always show that he/she is human and never be afraid to do what the children do.

A non-threatening classroom atmosphere in which there exists a mutual level of teacher-student, student-teacher respect will make each correction

easier and more helpful to the "holistic" language learning process of each individual child.

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