My own interest in the treatment of error in second language (L2) student writing began, literally, in various women’s restrooms on several university campuses in the latter half of the 1980s. This was where I and other ESL teachers would talk about a dilemma that we all struggled with. We had been trained to be “process-approach” writing teachers (following seminal works such as Zamel 1982 and Krashen 1984)—encouraging multiple drafting, revision, collaboration, and an emphasis on ideas, with attention to language issues (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics) being intentionally postponed to the very end of the composing process. What this often meant, in practice, was that grammar and editing issues were almost never addressed by teachers or their students in the ESL writing classroom. And yet, we found, the students’ language problems were not magically disappearing as the sure result of a more enlightened process and view of writing. Worse, L2 writers themselves, painfully aware of their own linguistic deficits and the need for teacher intervention, were disappointed with instructional policies such as “I will not correct your journal entries, your freewrites, or your early essay drafts. You should be focusing on expressing your ideas and building fluency and not worrying about grammar until ‘later.’”

This simultaneous awareness of persistent written error and of student frustration led to whispered restroom discussions.

“I’m teaching grammar in my writing class.”

“I am, too. I have to. They need it!”

To those of us trained in process philosophies and techniques, error correction, grammar instruction, and editing-strategy training felt like the “dirty little secrets” of our writ-
ing classes. We were ashamed because we felt that we should “know better” and that we and our students should have “moved beyond” these issues. Still, our sense of what students needed overrode these considerations, and the treatment of error continued, albeit somewhat underground.

My own need to understand what might help my university ESL writers to improve the linguistic accuracy of their texts has led me over the past ten years to pursue a variety of classroom research projects (see, e.g., Ferris 1995c, 1997; Ferris et al. 1997; Ferris and Roberts 2001) and to develop teaching materials for ESL writing classes and for teacher preparation courses. This book pulls together the results of these explorations in what I hope is a coherent and holistic approach to the treatment of error in L2 writing classes.

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