

**Alerting Students to the Correct Use of *Until*
Using an Algorithmic Approach**

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An Algorithmic Approach to Error Correction

Handling students' language accuracy problems is one of the main difficulties facing English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers nowadays. To help students overcome their persistent common lexico-grammatical problems, my collaborators and I have recently developed an algorithmic approach to error correction (Chan, 2002; Chan, Kwan, & Li, 2002a, 2002b, in press; Chan & Li, 2002; Chan, Li, & Kwan, in press; Kwan, Chan, & Li, in press; Li & Chan, 2000, 2001). Partly inspired by theoretical and empirical studies in consciousness-raising research (Rutherford, 1987, 1988; Schmidt, 1990; Sharwood Smith, 1981), and partly by recent research into form-focused instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998), the algorithmic approach is characterized by four main features: (a) pedagogically sound input requiring minimal cognitive effort; (b) proceduralized steps supported by instructive examples; (c) explicit rules to help learners conceptualize the correction procedure; and (d) reinforcement exercises.

We experimented with 13 lexico-grammatical problems, such as the dangling modifier, the inappropriate use of the connective *on the contrary*, and the anomalous structure *very like*, as in the sentence *I very like music* (for details, see Li, Chan, & Kwan, 2002). Results of the research study show that the approach is effective and versatile, and that students made significant improvements in the lexico-grammatical items under investigation after remedial teaching (Chan, 2002; Chan, Kwan, & Li, 2002a; Chan & Li, 2002).

Teachers may apply the algorithmic approach to other anomalies, provided they are well-defined lexico-grammatical problems amenable to effective correction using the approach (Chan, 2002). To show the versatility and adaptability of the algorithmic approach, I will describe its main features using the teaching procedure for a lexico-grammatical problem not dealt with in the research study—the use of the lexical item *until*, which is used inappropriately by many Chinese ESL students, including advanced learners.

Use of *Until*

The following examples show how *until* is inappropriately used.

1. ?The most important person in my life is my father *until forever*.
2. ?I still remember this picture *until now*.
3. ?I have not heard from, you *until present*.

At first glance, the sentences all seem acceptable. A careful scrutiny of the intended meanings, however, reveals that by using *until* with words like *forever* or *now*, the speaker wants to emphasize the truth of the preceding statement both at the time of speaking and *forever* or *now*. The speaker does not intend to state that the preceding statement ceases to be true *forever* or *now*. Such a use of *until* may result in misunderstanding between the speaker and the listener.

To help students acquire the target language norm, teachers should guide them to understanding the proper use of the lexical item. According to the *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2001), if something happens *until* a particular time, it happens during the period before that time and stops at that time. The preposition *until* is also used with a negative to emphasize the moment in time after which the rest of the statement becomes true, or the condition that would make it true (p. 1720; also see Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 534). The following section demonstrates how teachers can help students discover the correct use of *until*.

Procedure

Phase I: Help Students Notice the Problem

Are the following sentences correct? Mark a **I** if you think so, and a **x** if you don't think so. Two examples have been done for you.

X

a. She will wait until 4 p.m.	
b. The most important person in my life is my father until forever.	
c. He will not stop working until he is tired.	
d. I have not eaten my lunch until now.	
e. She was a high-ranking official in the committee until 2003.	
f. I remember his name until now.	

Phase II: Guide Students to Discover the Correct Use of Until

Although the sentences all look similar, some of them may not be used appropriately to express the writers' views. Let us look at sentence (a) first.

(a) She will wait until 4 p.m.

- Ⓡ What will she do? _____
- Ⓡ Is she going to wait nonstop? _____
- * When will she stop waiting? _____

Now, let us look at sentence (b).

(b) The most important person in my life is my father until forever.

- Who is the most important person in my life? _____
- Is my father the most important person in my life FOREVER?

Let us compare sentence (a) with sentence (b). Fill in the boxes below by putting a or a x to show the truth of the statements (in capitals) at the time specified.

(a) WAIT	Before 4 p.m.	4 p.m. and after

The above shows that although both sentence (a) and sentence (b) use *until* with a time, the intended meanings are different.

Now, let us look at sentence (c).

(c) He will not stop working until he is tired.

- What will he NOT do? _____
- Is he going to work nonstop? _____
- When will he stop? _____

Look at sentence (d).

(d) I have not eaten my lunch until now.

- Did I have my lunch before saying the sentence? _____
- Did I have my lunch when saying the sentence? _____

Let us compare sentence (c) with sentence (d). Fill in the boxes below by putting a or a x to show the truth of the statements (in capitals) at the time specified.

and explicit rules can help students conceptualize the correct model. The algorithmic approach described in this article, which adopts a step-by-step consciousness-raising mechanism, helps to arouse learners' consciousness of the nature of the anomaly and the correct usage. When learners can notice their own errors and have a heightened awareness of the target language norm, they will be able to achieve mature linguistic competence. I suggest that ESL teachers try adopting this approach to help their students overcome other common, consistent lexico-grammatical problems their students encounter.

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BOOK REVIEWS

The ESL Student's Secret Weapon

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The Cambridge Dictionary of American English. Sidney I. Landau (Ed.). Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 1088. 2000. \$23.00. ISBN: 0-521-77974-X paperback with CD-ROM.

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