

The effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing

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Abstract

Debate about the value of providing corrective feedback on L2 writing has been prominent in recent years as a result of Truscott's [Truscott, J. (1996). The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes. *Language Learning*, 46, 327–369] claim that it is both ineffective and harmful and should therefore be abandoned. A growing body of empirical research is now investigating the agenda proposed by Ferris [Ferris, D.R. (1999). The case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes. A response to Truscott (1996). *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8, 1–10, Ferris, D.R. (2004). The "Grammar Correction" debate in L2 writing: Where are we, and where do we go from here? (and what do we do in the meantime...?). *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 49–62.]. Contributing to this research base, the study reported in this article investigated whether the type of feedback (direct, explicit written feedback and student–researcher 5 minute individual conferences; direct, explicit written feedback only; no corrective feedback) given to 53 adult migrant students on three types of error (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article) resulted in improved accuracy in new pieces of writing over a 12 week period. The study found a significant effect for the combination of written and conference feedback on accuracy levels in the use of the past simple tense and the definite article in new pieces of writing but no overall effect on accuracy improvement for feedback types when the three error categories were considered as a single group. Significant variations in accuracy across the four pieces of writing support earlier SLA discoveries that L2 learners, in the process of acquiring new linguistic forms, may perform them with accuracy on one occasion but fail to do so on other similar occasions.

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1. Introduction

Since Truscott published his 1996 article, "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes," debate about whether and how to give L2 students feedback on their written

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grammatical errors has been of considerable interest to researchers and classroom practitioners (Ferris, 1999, 2002, 2004; Truscott, 1996, 1999). On several grounds, Truscott (1996) claimed that grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned. From an analysis of studies by Kepner (1991), Semke (1984) and Sheppard (1992), he concluded that there is no convincing research evidence that error correction ever helps student writers improve the accuracy of their writing. For two major reasons, he explained that this finding should not be surprising. On the one hand, he argued that error correction, as it is typically practised, overlooks SLA insights about the gradual and complex process of acquiring the forms and structures of a second language. On the other hand, he outlined a range of practical problems related to the ability and willingness of teachers to give and students to receive error correction. Moreover, he claimed that error correction is harmful because it diverts time and energy away from the more productive aspects of a writing programme. Not surprisingly, these claims have since generated a considerable amount of vigorous debate at international conferences and in published articles (Ellis, 1998; Ferris, 1999; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Truscott, 1999).

Championing the case against Truscott's firmly held position, Ferris (1999) claimed that his arguments were premature and overly strong given the rapidly growing research evidence pointing to ways in which effective error correction can and does help at least some student writers, providing it is selective, prioritised and clear. While acknowledging that Truscott had made several compelling points concerning the nature of the SLA process and practical problems with providing corrective feedback, Ferris maintained that the evidence he cited in support of his argument was not always complete. As Chandler (2003) also points out, Truscott did not always take into account the fact that reported differences need to be supported with statistically significant evidence. In addition, Ferris maintained that there were equally strong reasons for teachers to continue giving feedback, not the least of which is the belief that students have regarding its value. However, she did accept that it is necessary to consider ways of improving the practical issues highlighted by Truscott.

Despite his call for the abandonment of error correction, Truscott (1999), in his response to Ferris, acknowledged that many interesting questions remain open and that it would be premature to claim that research has proven error correction can never be beneficial under any circumstances. However, he suggested that researchers and teachers should acknowledge that grammar correction is, in general, a bad idea until future research demonstrates that there are specific cases in which it might not be a totally misguided practice. Agreeing with the future research focus proposed by Ferris (1999), he suggested that attention be given to investigating which methods, techniques, or approaches to error correction lead to short-term or long-term improvement and whether students make better progress in monitoring for certain types of errors than others. The following section surveys some of the major findings from studies that have sought to examine these issues.

2. Research evidence on whether error correction results in improved accuracy

Only a few studies have attempted to directly investigate whether L2 students who receive written corrective feedback on their errors are able to improve the accuracy of their writing compared with those who do not receive error feedback. Each of these studies (Kepner, 1991; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992) reported that there was no significant difference in the writing accuracy of the students. However, it needs to be noted that three of the studies (Polio et al., 1998; Robb et al., 1986; Sheppard, 1992) did not include a non-feedback control group. Although Fathman and Whalley (1990) found that

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