The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes: A Response to Truscott (1996)

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John Truscott’s 1996 Language Learning article, “The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes,” has led to a great deal of discussion and even some controversy about the best way to approach issues of accuracy and error correction in ESL composition. This article evaluates Truscott’s arguments by discussing points of agreement and disagreement with his claims and by examining the research evidence he uses to support his conclusions. The paper concludes that Truscott’s thesis that “grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned” (1996, p. 328) is premature and overly strong and discusses areas for further research.

Error correction in L2 writing is a source of great concern to writing instructors and of controversy to researchers and composition theorists. As I have noted elsewhere, over the past twenty years, approaches to responding to students’ grammar problems have included “opposing extremes of obsessive attention to every single student error and benign neglect of linguistic accuracy” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 198). Real-life teachers, however, have always known that students’ errors are troublesome, that students themselves are very concerned about accuracy, and that responding effectively to students’ grammatical and lexical problems is a challenging endeavor fraught with uncertainty about its long-term effectiveness. Teachers of L2 composition who regularly provide grammar-oriented feedback would doubtless report that this is one of the most time-consuming and exhausting aspects of their jobs. Because of the perceived importance of error correction and the amount of emphasis both teachers and students place on it, it is reasonable to ask whether grammatical correction is effective and appropriate at all, and if so, what the best ways are to approach it.

In light of these concerns, John Truscott’s controversial review essay, “The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes,” published June, 1996, in Language Learning, has certainly led to a great deal of discussion and comment. At the recent TESOL Convention in Seattle, several major colloquium papers either supported or offered rebuttals to Truscott’s arguments. In a major review of
L2 grammar teaching issues, Ellis (1998) devotes space to summarizing and reacting to Truscott's thesis (p. 53). When I first encountered Truscott's article and told colleagues about it, the reaction was instantaneous and consistent. Veteran teachers recoiled as if they'd been punched in the stomach. Not correct ESL student writers' grammar errors—not at all? Wouldn't our students revolt? Wouldn't we all get fired when our students failed their writing exams and content courses?

Because of my own scholarly and pedagogical interests in the topic of feedback to student writers (including error feedback), I decided to examine Truscott's arguments and claims more carefully, also putting some of my MA TESOL graduate students to work on the project. While doing this, I must admit that I was secretly hoping I could agree with Truscott and accept his argument. Like most people, I find responding to students' written errors time-consuming and mostly tedious. I also find that the time and energy I spend sometimes does not pay off in long-term student improvement. Wouldn't it be convenient if we could all just agree that grammar correction does not work and that we should spend our in-class and out-of-class time focusing on more engaging issues of content and rhetoric?

Unfortunately for my hidden agenda, my careful scrutiny of Truscott's evidence convinced me that his argument does not hold up at some key points and that his conclusion that "grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned" (1996, p. 328) is premature and overly strong. However, in considering some of Truscott's arguments, I also concluded that he made several compelling points, particularly with regard to second language acquisition issues and practical problems (pp. 342-354), with which L2 writing teachers and researchers should be concerned. If nothing else, reading Truscott's essay and reviewing the primary sources he cites has highlighted for me the urgent need for new research efforts which utilize a variety of paradigms to examine a range of questions that arise around this important topic.

**Summary of Truscott's Argument**

Before discussing areas of agreement and disagreement with Truscott, it is important to summarize the ground that he covers in his review article. Truscott begins by stating that most L2 writing teachers accept grammar correction as a necessary activity without any critical examination of whether this practice is effective. The purpose of the article, therefore, is to provide this critical examination. Truscott's thesis and major points are stated clearly:

Grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned. The reasons are: (a) Research evidence shows that grammar correction is ineffective; (b) this lack of effectiveness is exactly what should be expected, given the
nature of the correction process and the nature of language learning; (c) grammar correction has significant harmful effects; and (d) the various arguments offered for continuing it all lack merit. (1996, pp. 328-329)

The article continues with a review of L1 and L2 studies on error correction, concluding that the available research demonstrates that “correction is clearly ineffective” (p. 330). Truscott then moves into “theoretical problems” (pp. 342-49) related to second language acquisition theory: orders of acquisition, interlanguage, and the role of L2 intuition versus metalinguistic knowledge.

Truscott next discusses “practical problems” (pp. 349-354) associated with error correction. The sources of these practical problems are both writing teachers and their students. First, teachers must be able to recognize that an error has been made and to identify the correct form or usage, and as Truscott points out, “questions regarding grammar can be very difficult, even for experts” (p. 350). Even if teachers do recognize an error, they may not be able to explain the problem to the students, either because of lack of knowledge or lack of time. And if teachers are able to explain problems clearly, “students may well fail to understand the explanation” (p. 350), may forget the information even when they do understand it, or may not be sufficiently motivated to apply the knowledge to their future writing.

Truscott concludes the article by going on the offensive—arguing that not only is grammar correction ineffective, it is actually harmful to students (and teachers). He claims that correction causes stress and demotivates students and that it takes up too much teacher and student time which could be more productively and pleasantly spent on other aspects of writing. Finally, he attempts to refute the two most pervasive arguments in favor of error correction: That not correcting errors promotes fossilization and that students want feedback on their errors and will be frustrated by its absence. He ends with the following strong statements:

Because correction does not help students’ accuracy, and may well damage it, simply abandoning correction will not have harmful effects on accuracy (or anything else) and might improve it. In other words, teachers can help students’ accuracy at least as much by doing nothing as by correcting their grammar....(1996, p. 360).

Thus, Truscott argues that it is not only all right for teachers not to mark their students’ grammar errors, but it is actually preferable for them not to do so. Appealing as this conclusion may be to right-brained types like me, there are two important weaknesses in Truscott’s argument: The problem of definition and the problem of support.

Disagreements With Truscott’s Argument

The first issue that leaps out to the careful reader is the critical lack of definition for the term “error correction.” Truscott defines “grammar correction” only in the
vaguest of terms: "correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of improving a student's ability to write accurately." He goes on to say that "correction comes in many different forms, but for present purposes such distinctions have little significance" (p. 329). This is where I, and most teachers I know, would disagree vehemently. As with any other aspect of teaching, there are more and less effective ways to approach error correction in L2 writing. We would all doubtless agree that poorly done error correction will not help student writers and may even mislead them. However, there is mounting research evidence that effective error correction—that which is selective, prioritized, and clear—can and does help at least some student writers (for reviews and specific suggestions, see Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Ellis, 1998; Ferris, 1995c; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Reid, 1997). Thus, in discussing whether or not grammar correction is "effective," it is crucially important to know what sort of error correction we are discussing.

The second serious flaw in Truscott's argument is in his review of previous studies of error correction in L2 writing. An exercise I like to give pre-service teachers in my TESOL graduate courses is to have them read a review article, such as Truscott's, to read several of the key studies cited by the reviewer, and then to compare their own reading of the original sources with the statements made by the reviewer. This exercise is always very illuminating. More often than not, the reviewer has under- or over-stated the findings and claims of the original studies to suit his or her own generalizations or arguments (see also Spack, 1998, for a discussion of the importance of reading primary sources). This exercise was especially enlightening in the case of Truscott's article. There are three major problems with the research review section of Truscott's paper: (a) The subjects in the various studies are not comparable; (b) The research paradigms and teaching strategies vary widely across the studies; and (c) Truscott overstates negative evidence while disregarding research results that contradict his thesis.

The L2 error correction studies cited by Truscott examined very diverse groups of subjects. The vast majority of the studies (Cardelle & Corno, 1981; Kepner, 1991; Lalande, 1982; Semke, 1984) looked at subjects who were college-level foreign language students in the U.S. or who were EFL learners (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Sheppard, 1992). It has been argued (e.g., Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994) that foreign-language students are less motivated to revise and correct their work since their language classes do not focus extensively on multiple-draft process-oriented instruction and since their need to write fluently and accurately in the target language is typically limited to assignments within the language classroom. Only one of the studies reviewed in this section is a large-scale examination of ESL college students in the U.S. (Fathman & Whalley, 1990). Acknowledging these crucial contextual differences, Truscott himself notes that "the students' origins and L1s varied widely" (p. 334).
The research and instructional paradigms in this section vary widely as well. Some studies covered an entire quarter or semester; others consisted of a “one-shot” experimental treatment. The mechanisms used for giving feedback also differed dramatically. Also, as noted by Truscott, several of the studies lacked control groups. Because of these key differences in subjects, research design, and instructional methods, it is virtually impossible to support any generalization, other than the cliche “Further research is necessary,” from this group of studies.

Truscott also overstates research findings that support his thesis and dismisses out of hand the studies which contradict him. A particularly telling example is the 1991 study by Kepner, which Truscott cites at several key points in his article in support of his thesis. But Kepner’s subjects (who were Spanish foreign language students) were receiving feedback on their journal entries, not papers which were to be revised. It is difficult to see how this study says anything about the effectiveness of error correction when it takes place within the cycle of feedback and revision. On the other hand, for different reasons, he disregards the findings of Fathman and Whalley (1990) and Lalande (1982), both of which found positive effects for error correction.

To summarize, Truscott is right in asserting that the evidence supporting the effectiveness of error correction is scant. However, this conclusion must be heavily qualified by the inadequacy (both in terms of design and instructional methods) and lack of generalizability of the relatively few studies on this topic. Most importantly, it is a logical leap to then argue that research has proven that grammar correction never helps students.

Areas of Agreement with Truscott

Despite these shortcomings, Truscott makes several important points that need to be thoughtfully considered by teachers and carefully examined by researchers. For instance, in the section of his essay subheaded “Theoretical Problems” (pp. 342-49), Truscott points out that “There is some reason to think that syntactic, morphological, and lexical knowledge are acquired in different manners. If this is the case, then probably no single form of correction can be effective for all three” (p. 343). From my own experiences as a teacher of L2 writing, I have become increasingly convinced of the truth of this statement. I have previously suggested (Ferris, 1995a, 1995c, 1997; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998) that students can be successfully taught to self-edit their own texts if they are (a) focused on the importance of editing; (b) trained to identify and correct patterns of frequent and serious errors; and (c) given explicit teaching as needed about the rules governing these patterns of errors. I have also argued that indirect error correction (identification of errors) is preferable to direct correction (teacher correction of student errors).
However, through considering Truscott's arguments and reflecting on my own students' needs and progress (or lack thereof, in some cases), I have become increasingly aware that my suggestions are only applicable when students' errors occur in a patterned, rule-governed way. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. I recently completed a detailed error analysis of first week diagnostic essays written by my 21 university ESL students enrolled in a junior-level "writing for proficiency" course. Though many of the errors I noted were "treatable" using my system outlined above (e.g., subject-verb agreement, run-ons and comma splices, missing articles, verb form errors), nearly 50% were not. This latter category included a wide variety of lexical errors and problems with sentence structure, including missing words, unnecessary words, and word order problems.

Clearly, it was not adequate to simply underline these non-idiomatic, idiosyncratic errors in word choice and sentence construction. There is no handbook or set of rules students can consult to avoid or fix those types of errors. Instead, I developed an alternative approach to giving my students feedback about these "untreatable" errors, a combination of strategy training and direct correction (hoping that the latter would, if nothing else, provide input for acquisition of these idiomatic forms). Most systems advocated in writing textbooks and editing handbooks seem based on the assumption that "one size fits all" and that marking "wc" (for word choice) is the same as marking "vt" (for verb tense)—ignoring the important fact that for the latter type of error, there are rules to consult, while the former type of error has none. ESL writing teachers would do well to give much more thought to how they provide error feedback regarding these different types of language forms and structures.

Perhaps the most troubling and thought-provoking section of Truscott's essay is that titled "Practical Problems" (pp. 349-54), which argues that teacher and student limitations may short-circuit the accuracy and effectiveness of the error correction process. We can all hear the ring of truth in the assertions that teachers are inconsistent in their ability and willingness to recognize and correct errors and to provide adequate grammar explanations to their students. We also know that often students don't understand grammar feedback or are unmotivated to deal with it. These are legitimate and serious issues. However, they are not insurmountable. For the teacher, the answer lies in preparation, practice, and prioritizing. Clearly ESL teachers need a thorough grounding in linguistic/syntactic theory and in how to teach grammar to L2 learners. In addition, teachers need ample opportunities for practice—with error analyses of student texts and in providing feedback, grammatical information, and strategy training for their students. In a recent study of the effects of a grammar training project (Ferris, Harvey, & Nuttall, 1998), 12 MA TESOL students who participated in a ten-week tutorial program for ESL writers (which included detailed analyses of student errors and delivery of grammar mini-lessons on a variety of topics) showed a great deal of improvement in their ability to define key grammatical terms and to find, identify, and correct errors in ESL student writing.
The final key for overcoming some of teachers' practical problems is prioritizing. It is vitally important for teachers to commit themselves to selective error feedback and to a strategy for building students' awareness and knowledge of their most serious and frequent grammar problems. Careful prioritizing increases teachers' chances of being accurate and thorough in their feedback (because they are focusing on only a few problems at a time), as well as preventing the inevitable teacher burnout and overload that results from trying to deal with every single problem in every student paper.

As for the practical problems attributed to student writers, effective grammar feedback and instruction will take into account students' first language backgrounds, their English language proficiency, and their prior experience with English grammar instruction and editing strategies. For example, a grammar checklist appended by the teacher to student papers will be incomprehensible if the students have little or no prior experience with formal English grammar terminology. The thoughtful writing instructor will also address the issue of student motivation by raising student awareness about the importance of accuracy in their written texts and about the need to develop independent self-editing skills (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Ferris, 1995c; Reid, 1997).

We also should be realistic in our expectations. For a variety of reasons (including different learning styles, which are rarely considered in discussions of error correction; see Reid, 1997), some students will respond better to grammar correction than others will. Truscott offers a gloomy assessment of this situation:

Veteran teachers know that there is little direct connection between correction and learning: Often a student will repeat the same mistake over and over again, even after being corrected many times. (1996, p. 341)

However, in my own experience, there is tremendous variability in students' ability to benefit from grammar instruction and feedback and to learn to self-correct, and many students have made dramatic improvements in their accuracy over the course of a semester (see Ferris, 1995a). Truscott concludes that because some students do not improve in their accuracy or make fewer errors because of teacher feedback, we should do away with such correction altogether. Perhaps a fairer assertion is that many students can improve their writing as a result of judicious and well executed teacher feedback and that instead of doing away with grammar correction, we should devote ourselves to making our corrections even more effective.

Why Continue With Error Correction in L2 Writing Classes?

The discussion of Truscott's arguments against error correction raises a larger issue: If research evidence appears to contradict "common sense" or "intuitions," on which should a teacher rely, especially if the so-called "research evidence" is
scarce, conflicting, or incomplete (as in many issues in L2 teaching, including error correction)? In the case of error correction in L2 writing, there are at least three important reasons to continue the practice until such time as it has been conclusively proven to be ineffective and/or harmful. First, surveys of student opinion about teacher feedback have consistently affirmed the importance that L2 students place on receiving grammar correction from their teachers (Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995b; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Though Truscott argues that although “students believe in correction...that does not mean that teachers should give it to them” (1996, p. 359), many teachers would respond that the absence of any form of grammar feedback could frustrate students to the point that it might interfere with their motivation and confidence in the writing class, particularly when grading rubrics and writing proficiency examination results tell them that their language errors could prevent them from achieving their educational and professional goals. Second, studies of university subject-matter instructors suggest that at least some English-speaking university faculty are less tolerant of “typical” ESL errors than of “typical” native speaker errors, and that professors feel that students’ linguistic errors are bothersome and affect their overall evaluation of student papers. Third, this line of research certainly implies that ESL teachers should focus some attention on educating their subject-matter colleagues as to the duration and limitations of the second language acquisition process. But few would argue that ESL writing instructors should ignore their students’ linguistic difficulties on the hope that their present or future subject-matter professors will eventually “get over” their unrealistic expectations! Third, and probably most important, it is critical that students become more self-sufficient in editing their own writing. Though it is arguable whether grammar feedback and instruction will be consistently effective for all L2 student writers, it seems clear that the absence of any feedback or strategy training will ensure that many students never take seriously the need to improve their editing skills and that they will not have the knowledge or strategies to edit even when they do perceive its importance.

CONCLUSION

A Plea for Restraint and A Call for Further Research

As a teacher educator, I frequently encounter the frustration of my graduate students when they review the existing evidence on almost any topic related to second language learning and teaching. It is natural to want answers that are easily accessible and immediately applicable to the challenging endeavor of teaching. Yet in our rush to arrive at such solutions, we often make premature pronounce-
ments about what is or is not effective (see Silva, 1990, on the “merry-go-round of approaches” to teaching L2 writing that have been hastily adopted and discarded).

This rush, or stampede, to judgment is especially egregious in Truscott’s review essay. Based on limited, dated, incomplete, and inconclusive evidence, he argues for eliminating a pedagogical practice that is not only highly valued by students, but on which many thoughtful teachers spend a great deal of time and mental energy because they feel that helping students to improve the accuracy of their writing is vitally important. Had Truscott used his review to ask some pointed questions about error correction and to identify some of the problems raised by the available research, he would have done teachers and scholars a valuable service. But because he went further and offered sweeping conclusions, he has potentially put students at risk—that their teachers, teacher educators, or researchers will accept his claims uncritically and adjust their practices accordingly, to the possible detriment of students’ development as writers.

That said, there are certainly a number of areas for further research on error correction that are highlighted by the consideration of Truscott’s arguments. As noted by Ferris & Hedgcock (1998), efforts to find answers to the question “Does error correction work?” must consider three crucial factors:

(1) Is grammar feedback and instruction carried out selectively, systematically, and accurately? (2) Are individual student differences (including language proficiency, learning styles, motivation and attitude, first language, etc.) adequately considered and accounted for? and (3) Are studies which assess the effectiveness of error correction designed and executed appropriately? (p. 202)

Specific questions for further research might include (but are certainly not limited to) the following:

• Do teachers respond accurately to students’ errors? Does training and practice help them to do so more effectively?
• Are students more able to make progress in monitoring for certain types of errors than others (e.g., morphological or syntactic errors versus lexical errors)?
• Which individual student variables affect learners’ willingness and ability to benefit from error correction, and can student problems be mitigated by thoughtful pedagogical practices?
• Which methods, techniques, or approaches to error correction lead to short- or long-term student improvement (assuming that student, teacher, and contextual variables are adequately controlled for)?

Only when these questions and issues are examined systematically in a body of research (not a few scattered studies that cannot be compared) can Truscott’s the-
sis be definitively supported or refuted. Until that point, I reiterate my plea for restraint: Let us not rely on inadequate evidence to make important pedagogical decisions. Instead, let us keep our own experiences and intuitions in mind, listen to our students, and consider their needs in deciding if, when, and how to provide error feedback and correction to L2 student writers. At the same time, we must take Truscott’s claims and challenge seriously by examining the questions raised by his review to determine if there really is a better way to proceed. The issue of helping students to develop their written language skills and improve their accuracy in writing is too important to be ruled on hastily. As teachers, we can only hope that we will continue to find answers and discover ways to respond more thoughtfully and effectively to our student writers’ needs.

NOTES

1. A version of this paper was presented at the 32nd Annual TESOL Convention (March, 1998, Seattle, WA) and the CATESOL State Conference (April, 1998, Pasadena, CA).

2. Truscott anticipates this counterargument and attempts to rebut it (1996, p. 352). However, the evidence he cites against selective error correction is dated (from 1986 or earlier) and primarily focused on L1 writers.

3. Careful readers of “error gravity” research will note that the results of such studies have been conflicting and that instructors in some disciplines and some contexts react differently to written errors by non-native speakers. This is another area in which the research is certainly inconclusive and inadequate.

REFERENCES


