

Ling 653
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Literature Review

The Issue of Error Correction in ESL Student Writing

After having several English writing classes in college, I realized that, except for the college writing structure, every writing instructor has a different standard and expectation of ESL students' writing. Errors that were recognized by one teacher may not be recognized by another; the paper that receives positive comments from one teacher may be criticized by another. The confusion has resulted in frustration. Recalling my experience in writing classes provides the point of departure for this review of the literature. Despite of my personal negative attitude towards writing, I think it might be helpful to my academic writing to find out what researchers have found on error correction in ESL writing.

I first started with the website "Google," and found the *Journal of Second Language Writing*. I easily obtained a few articles about grammar correction and feedback in ESL writing. One of them titled "The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes: A response to Truscott (1996)" written by Ferris (1999) caught my attention the most. After skimming through it, I desperately wanted to read Truscott's article on grammar correction. Therefore, I went back to the library and searched for articles related to the subject of "grammar correction in ESL writing classes." I first tried *ERIC*, one of the Article Databases in the library, but the result was not satisfactory. Then I searched under LLBA (Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts), and I luckily obtained some relevant articles. Among other articles, I found Truscott's paper about grammar correction in L2 writing published in 1996. To my surprise, Truscott (1999) later wrote an article responding to Ferris' criticisms. It is very interesting to see two researchers defending themselves by providing numerous evidence to argue against each other. Besides *ERIC* and LLBA, I also searched under *PsycInfo*. This database also has a few articles related to this topic, but compared to LLBA, the results are not as relevant to my interest.

Individual review of each source

I. The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes

This is a journal article published by *Language Learning* in 1996. The complete reference is as follows: Truscott, J. (1996). The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes. *Language Learning*, 46, 327-369.

Truscott (1996) argues that grammar correction in second-language writing classes should be abandoned because it is ineffective and harmful. A number of studies are cited to provide evidence for the ineffectiveness and unhelpfulness of grammar correction in ESL writing classes. He concludes that there is no reason to correct grammar errors.

Though Truscott managed to find numerous negative results in many studies to support his thesis and only few positive results stemming from the grammar correction. It needs to be noted that he did not conduct any actual experiment in ESL writing classes to support his argument in the paper, and he might have overlooked some other significant findings that contradict arguments against grammar correction. For those ESL teachers who find responding to students' errors in writing very tiring and time-consuming, or those who think that students' motivation might be negatively affected, Truscott's article might be beneficial.

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

This is a journal article published by *Journal of Second Language Writing* in 1999. The complete reference is as follows: 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), 1-11.

After the scrutiny of Truscott's evidence, Ferris (1999) claims that, "Truscott's conclusion that *grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned* is premature and overly strong" (p. 2). She accuses Truscott for rejecting findings of previous studies that favor grammar correction, and claims that the studies Truscott used to support his conclusion do not address the present issue. She points out two problems in Truscott's argument. One is the definition for the term "error correction," and the other is his review of previous research findings on error correction in ESL writing classes. Examining the articles that Truscott cited to support his thesis, Ferris finds that, first, the subjects in those studies are very diverse and not comparable; second, the research design and instructional method vary across studies; third, Truscott overstates the negative findings, and disregards those that contradict his argument. Ferris also uses her own previous research findings and teaching experiences to confront Truscott's argument and to support error correction in L2 writing classes.

Although Ferris did not cite as many research findings as Truscott, she evaluated his argument carefully and systematically, by pointing out not only the flaws in Truscott's article but also her agreement with Truscott. Ferris encourages teachers to listen to students and consider their needs before deciding what and how to provide feedback on error correction to students. Her article is a great support to writing teachers who are for error correction in L2 writing.

III. The Case for "The case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes": A Response to Ferris

This is a journal article published by *Journal of Second Language Writing* in 1999. The complete reference is as followings: Truscott, J. (1999). The case for "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes": a response to Ferris. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(2), 111-122.

Truscott responds to Ferris' evaluation of his previous article published in 1996. He rejects Ferris' criticisms on his case again grammar correction, and asserts that Ferris' arguments are unfounded and biased. He responds to each of the issues from Ferris' article with his own counter arguments, and compares the previous evidence and statements of his thesis with Ferris' arguments. He claims that Ferris does not provide any published sources to support her position against his argument, nor does she find any adequate and sufficient evidence to show that his conclusion is inconsistent with other research findings he cites (since Ferris criticizes his conclusion as being "premature and overly strong."). He says, "...only the most sympathetic of readers would consider this adequate support for the accusation" (p.114).

Truscott's responses to Ferris article provide readers, especially ESL writing teachers, great opportunities to reevaluate the arguments that have been made by both Truscott and Ferris. Like Ferris, I made assumptions while reading Truscott's first article on grammar correction. For instance, I doubted the credibility and reliability of the research studies that Truscott used in his article in 1996. The reason was that some of the experiments *seemed* to be only carried on for a short period of time; therefore, the results did not appear to be convincing to me. Ferris calls that "one-shot experimental treatment." Yet, Truscott denies the statement, and claims that those studies were considerably longer than a semester. It leads us to think that to be an objective reader, one should not ignore views of either side.

IV. Grammar Correction in ESL students writing: How effective is it?

This is a journal article posted on *Schuykill* website which is founded and edited by graduate students of Temple University. The complete reference is as follows: Loewen, S. (1998). Grammar Correction in ESL students writing: How effective is it? Retrieved October 7, 2001, from Temple University, *Schuykill* web site: <http://www.temple.edu/gradmag/fall98/loewen>.

Loewen conducts a research project to examine Truscott's argument, and devises a research question: "Does correcting grammatical errors in students' essay result in improved accuracy in the use of those structures in subsequent revision as well as in the new essays?" (p. 2). He finds no significant effect for grammar correction, which confirms Truscott's argument. However, Loewen points out some limitations of his study, which need to be consid-

ered before generating any conclusion. One is the small sample size of the study, and the other is the infrequency occurrence of the structures that were under investigation.

This study provides a more objective view on grammar correction in ESL writing, although the result shows no significant effect on error correction in this experiment. Further research on the present issue may be essential in providing more objective scientific evidence.

V. ESL Learners' Performance in Error Correction in Writing: Some Implications for Teaching

This is a journal article published by Elsevier Science Ltd in 1997. The complete reference is as follows: Lee, I. (1997). ESL learners' performance in error correction in writing: Some implications for teaching. *System* 25 (4), 465-477.

The purpose of this study is to examine three common assumptions about error correction in ESL writing classes—*1. overt correction is helpful; 2. students can cope with error feedback in the form of a correction code; 3. all errors deserve equal attention* (p. 465). An error correction task was designed in three different conditions (direct prompting, indirect prompting, and no prompting at all) to test the assumptions, and 149 subjects participated in this study. The results show that students' major difficulty in error correction is recognizing the existence of errors. Some pedagogical implications arise from the study. Lee concludes that, first, teacher's error feedback is very important to facilitate error location to help error detection; second, teachers must clearly explain to students the principals of grammatical terminology to prevent them from making errors; third, it is suggested that teachers decide their priorities in error correction, based on the needs and language proficiency of the learners.

This article is beneficial to both students and teachers. It provides useful insights as to what methods of instructions teachers should use in order to empower students to become better editors and writers. At the time students reading the article can learn what are the essential skills they need in order to improve their writing abilities, and useful tools for self-error detection and correction.

Conclusion

Truscott's review paper on grammar correction published in 1996 has led to a great deal of discussion. He argues that grammar correction is both ineffective and harmful and therefore it has no place in the writing classroom. However, Ferris rejects Truscott's thesis after scrutinizing his sources. It was found that some of her arguments against Truscott were not valid. For example, she criticized the lack of definition for the term "error correction," which was denied by Truscott in his response to Ferris' article in 1999. Before making any judgment, I went back to Truscott's article published in 1996, but failed to find the term

“error correction” in his article. Nevertheless, Ferris made good points that, “...the viewer has under- or over-stated the findings and claims of the original studies to suit his or her own generalizations or arguments” (p.4)

Loewen and Lee both reviewed Truscott’s paper on grammar correction. Instead of debating over the issue of grammar correction, they conducted experiments individually. Loewen focused on how much grammar correction can improve students’ accuracy in writing, and the study result showed no significant improvement. Loewen avoids making a conclusion on whether grammar correction should be abandoned or not. Instead he makes another hypothesis for further research. That is, *...analytic learners might benefit from grammar correction because it would be consistent with their method of language learning. Holistic learners, on the other hand, might not benefit from such a method* (p.7).

On the other hand, Lee focused on students’ performance in error correction in written texts, and examined some common assumptions about teachers’ error correction. Based on the study findings, Lee generated some pedagogical implications by rephrasing the three assumptions mentioned above: *1. error feedback may be more desirable than overt correction; 2. error feedback by means of a correction code must be handled with care; and 3. some errors may deserve more attention than others* (p. 471).

There are some statements from Ferris’ article that I, as an ESL student, totally agree with. I think every ESL writing teacher should be aware of the fact that: “...teachers are inconsistent in their ability and willingness to recognize and correct errors and provide adequate grammar explanations to their students.” She goes on and states, “...often students don’t understand grammar feedback or are unmotivated to deal with it.”

There is contrary evidence as to whether or not grammar correction is beneficial to students in ESL writing classes. Due to the lack of conclusive evidence for each case, it should be left for the readers to decide whether error correction in teaching ESL writing should be abandoned or not.