

Reexamining the Value of Grammatical Corrective Feedback in Improving Students' Accuracy in L2 Writing: Is It Any Good?

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Abstract: *In this paper the author looks back at the issue of grammatical corrective feedback (CF) for second/foreign (L2) undergraduate students' writing. The two main theoretical positions, i.e., that grammar correction is useless and possibly counterproductive, Truscott (1996), and that grammar correction has positive effects over the long term, Ferris (1999), are broadly reviewed. On this research base, the author designed a research plan to support the hypothesis that comprehensive feedback would result in a significant improvement of students' grammatical accuracy. At the beginning of the semester, the author pretested English IV (EIV) Assumption University (AU) undergraduate students. They were given one same paragraph with 10 grammatical errors. During the semester, one group of students randomly selected, Group 1 (G1), was given basic CF while Group 2 (G2), comprehensive CF. The same procedure, with the same paragraph and correction techniques, was applied for the posttest. The Independent Samples T-test was used to measure whether students showed any significant improvement in their ability to recognize and correct grammatical errors as the result of the two different types of CF given to them. The results were discussed, and the question is grammatical corrective feedback any good, answered.*

Keywords: Corrective Feedback, Error Correction, Grammatical Accuracy, L2 Writing

Introduction

The issue of corrective feedback in second/foreign language writing classes has become something of an institution, with most L2 teachers doing it religiously in one form or another. It is widely believed by researchers and teachers that grammar correction should, even must, be part of writing courses. However, this position has been vehemently opposed by researchers and teachers who have argued that grammatical CF in students' writings does not contribute to improved accuracy. This debate has been going on for decades now, and it was initiated by Truscott's (1996) case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes, and then opposed by Ferris (1999) in her response to Truscott. Intense, as it has been, however, the debate also has a number of limitations, the main one being that it was a dispute between just two individuals. In recent years, support for error correction has increased, suggesting that comprehensive CF is a useful educational tool that teachers can use to help L2 learners improve their written accuracy.

Literature Review

In his paper, Truscott (1966) argues that grammatical CF in writing classes should be abandoned for several reasons, namely that research shows it is ineffective and, moreover, it has harmful effects. The paper also rejects a number of arguments previously offered in favor of grammar correction. However, the author does not deny the value of grammatical accuracy, the issue being whether or not grammar correction can contribute to its development. Also, the author recognizes the fact that correction comes in different forms but such distinctions have little significance since there is no reason to think that any of the variations should be used in writing classes (Truscott, 2004). This last point is of significance to this researcher and will constitute the basis of this present paper reexamining the value of grammatical CF.

In her response to Truscott, Ferris (1999) was quick to counterattack and argue that the former's position has led to controversy about the best ways to tackle issues of error correction in L2 writing. However, she proceeds to evaluate Truscott's arguments by discussing points of agreement and disagreement with his claims. Ferris' 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.

Whether or not teachers should provide correction simply because some students want it is, of course, a contentious issue. Truscott (1996) notes that there is abundant evidence that students believe in grammar correction. However, he argues that "this does not mean that teachers should give it to them. The obligation teachers have to students is not to use whatever form of instruction the students think is best, but rather to help them learn" (Truscott, 1996, p. 344). Ferris (2002), on the other hand, argues that students exhibit a growing frustration if error feedback (grammar correction) is not provided by their teachers and that this frustration impedes their language learning progress. Interestingly, in their paper, Ferris, Roberts (2001) acknowledge that investigation of groups of students who received different feedback conditions (basic, detailed, explicit), showed that no group significantly outperformed the others leading to the conclusion that more explicit feedback does not help students improve their ability to recognize and correct errors.

The first two decades of the debate over the issue of CF, although interesting, even exciting, and stimulating, has an equal number of limitations, however. The first one is that it was fundamentally a debate between just two individuals and based solely on their respective backgrounds and teaching experience. The second is that the issue of grammatical corrective feedback is not just a yes or no, black or white issue; it has a multitude of gray areas, for instance, L1 background of students and also their level of proficiency in L2. Another point of limitation is the fact that one researcher, Ferris, does her research in the U.S. only, while the other, Truscott, in Taiwan. It would be interesting, indeed necessary, to know the results of research done in other parts of the world, with teachers and students of different language backgrounds.

Of somewhat particular relevance to this present research conducted at Assumption University, Thailand, is the study of Abedis et al. (2010), in that it deals with error detection and correction in the same way Assumption University's error recognition and correction approach does. Similarly, Asassfeh (2013) also deals with the issue of students' ability to detect errors, but his focus is on the three types of CF that have been identified within the theoretical framework of CF literature: direct, indirect, and metalinguistic, while Bitchener et al. (2005), provide a detailed explanation of each one of them. Despite the identification of these three types, the "two types of error correction that have received attention from researchers to date, are 'direct' and 'indirect' CF" (Ellis et al., 2008 p. 355).

Nassaji (2013) explores the effects of negotiated vs. non-negotiated CF noting that, although a substantial number of studies have examined the effects of grammar correction on second language written errors, however, most of the existing research has involved unidirectional written feedback. His study examined the effects of oral negotiation in addressing L2 written errors. On a different note, the use of technology and machine learning techniques is the focus of Chodorow et al., (2010) investigation of error correction systems. In their paper, they describe and evaluate two state-of-the-art systems for identifying and correcting writing errors involving English articles and prepositions: *Criterion*SM, developed by Educational Testing Service, and *ESL Assistant*, developed by Microsoft Research. Both use machine learning techniques to build models of article and preposition usage which enable them to identify errors and suggest corrections to the writer.

In Thailand, like practically elsewhere over the past two decades, the pendulum has clearly swayed towards the necessity of grammatical CF in students' writing. Opinions from students and institutional expectations are major factors contributing to this in spite of the fact that there is still a lack of unified

agreement at the theoretical level regarding its benefits. In his study aimed to examine grammatical error types in the writing of first year English major students studying a grammar course of 15 weeks at a University in Thailand, Niramon (2012), addresses the issue of retention of grammatical error correction, and the students' opinions on corrective feedback. The writer notes that it is quite obvious that grammatical error correction in student' work contributes to effective writing but also that at some grammar points it was found to decrease. Nevertheless, the decreasing occurrence can be interpreted as retention of the error correction, and it reflects advantages of grammatical analysis and correction. Similarly, in her case study on corrective feedback, Nguyen (2017) acknowledges that writing in English is challenging for Thai L2 writers, so feedback is crucial in assisting them, and focuses on the effectiveness of peer and teacher-feedback in L2 writing. The findings indicated its success in terms of students' positive attitudes towards this feedback model, the usefulness of peer comments, high percentages of feedback incorporations and the high overall writing scores. This paper is thus expected to shed some light on how Thai university students with their passive style of learning English positively react to this interactive activity and partly reflect how in-service teachers adjust feedback strategies in their actual teaching situations.

Tan et al. (2017) notes that written corrective feedback (WCF) in Thai learners' writing is widely used to point students to the grammatical errors in their written work and help reduce them. This paper reports a quasi-experimental study that compared the effectiveness of direct (detailed vs. simplistic) teacher WCF in a Thai context. Grammatical aspects focused on were tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, singular/plural nouns, prepositions and adjectives/adverbs. Furthermore, she correctly asserts that recent studies have provided robust evidence on the efficacy of error correction. WCF studies have been conducted in diverse settings and these studies, like this one, tend to begin by acknowledging the tension between Truscott (1996), who first questioned the usefulness of WCF in L2 development, and Ferris (1999), who rebutted Truscott and has remained consistent in advocating the use of WCF.

The study of Black and Nanni (2018) investigates the preferences and justifications of teachers and students on written corrective feedback at a tertiary institution in Thailand, and is aimed at expanding on prior similar studies conducted with smaller data sets in different contexts. Teachers rated indirect feedback with metalinguistic comment as being most useful while students most preferred direct feedback with metalinguistic comment. The purposes of Warunya and Maneerat (2018) study were to investigate the transfer effects of the combination of written corrective feedback including direct and indirect corrective feedback on Thai students' grammatical accuracy in new pieces of writing, and to compare the difference between providing the combination of written corrective feedback in different orders. The findings revealed that the combination of written corrective feedback had transferring effects on students' grammatical accuracy in their subsequent writing. Lastly, students were found to have positive attitudes towards direct written corrective feedback more than indirect written corrective feedback. Also referring to Thai students' difficulties with writing, Nguyen (2019), in her case study on feedback, correctly acknowledges that Thai students are reported to have serious problems in English writing, which are partly caused by their culturally-based English learning styles. She, then, reports on how teachers can assist them through their feedback, namely the practice of teacher feedback in terms of its forms, locations, types and purposes. Her findings show how in-service teachers adjust feedback strategies in their actual teaching situations to prepare EFL students to become self-regulating writers.

Corrective Feedback in the Context of Assumption University

To the contextual issues of student expectations, another component, institutional expectations may be added (Slater, 2006). Truscott may be free to adopt a correction-free approach to his classes and to claim that his students do not become frustrated and, indeed, are much happier (Truscott, 1999). Similarly, Krashen (2004) and Gray (2004), may feel it is sufficient for teachers simply to inform their students of the limitations of grammar correction and then desist with it altogether. However, the reality of the

Assumption University (AU) context makes it unlikely that such approaches are practicable. As mentioned earlier, Ferris (2002), argues that students exhibit a growing frustration if error feedback (grammar correction) is not provided by their teachers and that this frustration impedes their language learning progress.

This researcher would argue that grammar correction, like all aspects of the teaching of language, must be viewed in context. Here at AU, English teachers are dealing with several important contextual factors which ought to influence their attitudes to, and use of, grammar correction. The first is that they are teaching students who are endeavoring to study at the tertiary level through the medium of English. This means that, as well as, needing to listen to speak and read English with relatively high proficiency; they will be required to write in English in most of their major and minor subjects. Writing, particularly academic writing, demands high standards of accuracy. If grammar correction holds the potential for even only modest gains in student accuracy, as at least some research suggests (see Ferris, 2001), then there is an imperative for its use. The second, and perhaps more important, contextual factor, is that upon graduation, AU students will be expected to be able to write at least simple business and professional correspondence without error. Students, who are unable to do this, even though they might be able to converse in English reasonably fluently, are unlikely to satisfy many employers, especially non-Thai ones. Indeed, the importance of written grammatical accuracy is noted by Krashen (2004) even though he is, as noted, skeptical of the usefulness of grammar correction in achieving it. He points out that society's standards for accuracy, especially in writing, are 100%, and that people are not allowed mistakes in punctuation, spelling, or grammar. Moreover, he asserts that just one public error, in fact, can result in humiliation.

The English IV course at Assumption University is a writing course, and also the last and most advanced course for undergraduate students. Error recognition and correction is part of the course from the beginning to the end of the semester. Over the past decade, until recently, the contents of the English IV course had not changed, and this fact has driven this researcher, who has been teaching and collecting data from English IV students at Assumption University for over ten years, to determine whether different types of CF in their writings contributes to their learning gains, especially in improving their grammatical accuracy. Each semester, students practice a number of paragraphs consisting of basically the same patterns of errors (Popovici, 2018), for instance, determiner-noun/subject-verb disagreement, absence of determiner/plural, and so on. Since, during the semester, students repeatedly practice basically the same patterns of errors, they develop some techniques of identifying and even correcting them, so students do show some improvement during the semester. This researcher, however, wants to know whether extra, detailed, comprehensive CF can make a difference. While the value of grammatical accuracy improvement cannot be denied, the aim in this research is to determine whether or not comprehensive grammatical corrective feedback, with examples and parallel situations, is what actually contributes to students' accuracy development.

Research Objective, Question, and Hypothesis

Clearly stated, the objective of this study is:

To determine whether comprehensive corrective feedback contributes to the improvement of students' accuracy in identifying grammatical errors, and in correcting them. Thus, the research question is:

Can comprehensive correction feedback contribute significantly to the improvement of students' accuracy in identifying and correcting grammatical errors?

The assumption on which this study is based is that explicit, detailed and comprehensive correction feedback with explanation, examples and parallel situations, as opposed to simple, basic feedback, may contribute to the improvement of students' accuracy in identifying and correcting grammatical errors.

Thus, the Null Hypothesis is

Ho: Explicit, detailed and comprehensive correction feedback is not statistically significant in improving the students' ability to recognize and correct grammatical errors.

And the Alternate Hypothesis is

Ha: Explicit, detailed and comprehensive correction feedback is statistically significant in improving the students' ability to recognize and correct grammatical errors.

Research Design and Methodology

Contributing to the vast research base outlined earlier in this paper, the author designed a research plan created to support the alternate hypothesis that comprehensive, detailed CF would result in a significant improvement of students' grammatical accuracy.

Sample Population

The samples selected for this experiment were two groups of students randomly chosen out of the larger population of English IV Assumption University undergraduates and, based on the results, the researcher attempts to generalize the characteristics of these sample groups as the characteristics of the larger population of English IV students, with the aim of demonstrating that WCF in the form of detailed, comprehensive explanation, and with examples of parallel situations, has a significant impact in improving the students' skills in identifying and correcting grammatical errors. This experiment was carried out by this researcher who was also the instructor of the English IV Assumption University undergraduates randomly selected for Group 1 (G1), 80 students, and for a similar group of 80 students for Group 2 (G2).

Error recognition and correction has been an important part of the English IV course at AU, in fact, the only grammar-focused component of English IV. Until recently, the course had been taught continuously and in the same manner by this instructor. At the beginning and end of each semester, students were tested with the same one paragraph used in this research. Out of the vast amount of data collected during one year of academic instruction, this researcher randomly selected 80 students for G1, and another 80 for G2.

Informed Consent

Although relatively little empirical research has been conducted on the study of ethics in the field of English as a second/foreign language, there are ethical issues involved with regards to recruiting university students as research subjects and/or promising them benefits in the form of credits for participation (Sterling, 2015). This research was done in an ethically responsible manner and in line with two major responsibilities of the researcher, namely, to secure the privacy and freedom from coercion for participants and, at the same time, to balance confidentiality with the need to present results to the class openly. Since this study was conducted by this researcher who was also the instructor, students were aware of, and familiar with, routine testing at the beginning and end of semesters. They were informed of the short, extra tutoring practice given at the end of each class, and were happy to participate voluntarily.

Instrument

The pretest and posttest evaluation instrument was a paragraph consisting of ten grammatical errors that students were asked to identify and to correct. At the beginning of each semester they were given one same paragraph with 10 common errors that students make frequently. Each correctly identified and corrected error was given 10 points, 5 for recognition and, separately, 5 for correction, so the total number of points for each group's student was 100. This, below, is a list of the common errors students routinely make:

-determiner-noun disagreement: *this cats*,

-subject-verb disagreement: *they is*,

-erroneous use of modals: *I should to go with you*,

-absence of a necessary plural or determiner: *I like cat*,

-absence of determiner/plural/3rd person singular –s: *student like*,

-fragment sentences: *Because I have no money*,

-run-on sentences: *I met my friend yesterday she came back from London*.

-rambling sentences: *John usually gets up before 7 o'clock, but yesterday his alarm clock did not ring, so he was still asleep when his boss called him at 10.30 to ask where he was and tell him that he would lose his job if he was late again*.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this study was to determine whether, while both groups show slight or moderate gains during the semester's teaching, the group that was given extra, detailed and comprehensive CF significantly outperformed the other group that only benefited from basic CF. The paragraph consisting of 10 grammatical errors that students were supposed to recognize and correct was typical of the paragraphs given to English IV students each semester. Here is the paragraph of G1 corrected with just the marking of errors (bold), and the correct forms given at the end:

*Many years ago, I had an opportunity to visit the **southern** (1) of Thailand, where I experienced many things that were different from my daily life, whether the **lifestyles** (2) food, or the local languages. At that time, the communities were peaceful, with tourists from many countries **visited** (3) to see the beauty of the area. Recently, I **return** (4) to the South, and found that much was changed. One of the **change** (5) I noticed was a depressingly sad atmosphere. There were no longer any of the vibrant tourist activities **I** (6) seen before. However, one thing still **remained** (7) the people I met still greeted me with warm hospitality. They would always try to reply when I asked them **questions** (8) in school, asking questions made my teachers angry. This hospitality **were** (9) extended to everyone without discrimination. Though the causes of **a** (10) violence are clear, people in the South still try to carry on their normal lives.*

(By permission IELE, Assumption University)

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|---------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. South | 2. lifestyles, (comma) | 3. visiting | 4. returned | 5. changes |
| 6. I had seen | 7. remained: (colon) | 8. questions. (full stop) | 9. was | 10. the |

Students from G2 were returned their respective paragraph with the marking of errors plus comprehensive corrective feedback with explanations, examples and parallel situations:

Here is the same paragraph corrected for G2 with comprehensive correction feedback plus explanations, examples and parallel situations:

1-*the South of*; South is a noun while southern, an adjective: southern Thailand. Examples: the North of Africa, northern Africa.

2-*lifestyles, (, comma)*; a comma is required here to separate nouns in a list of things: lifestyles, food, languages.

3-*visiting*; the present participle phrase “visiting” is a result of a reduced relative clause, a common form that is derived from a verb but that functions as an adjective, ending in -ing: birds flying, children playing.

4-*returned*; it is a past story so verbs need to be in the past tense form: returned and found.

5-*changes*; plural is required here: one of many, for example, I have five cats; one of the cats is white.

6-*had seen*; have seen or had seen? Why had seen? Because it is a past action that happened before another past action: Before he died (past), he had told (past perfect) me many stories.

7-remained;(*colon*); used to precede a list of items, a quotation, or an expansion or explanation: I'll tell you one secret: I'm in love.

8-*questions*. In school; (. full stop); two different ideas need to be separated with full stop. One idea has one subject: people; the other idea has a different subject: questions.

9-*was*; the subject, this hospitality, is singular so the verb, were, needs to be singular too.

10-*the* violence; the article *the* must be used here for several reasons: it is something all people know about; also, this situation is mentioned indirectly from the beginning, so it is not new to the reader, but it is unique (example, *the* II World War).

Data Collection and Analysis

Both test scores, the pretest and posttest results, were initially stored in Excel file, and then transferred to SPSS data file. All the data collected were analyzed using SPSS. The Independent Samples T-test was used to measure whether there was a statistically significant difference between G2 that benefitted from comprehensive corrective feedback and G1 that only received basic feedback.

For the pretest, the group statistics shows a slight difference between the means of G1, at 48.031, and G2, at 48.131, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Independent Samples T-test for the Pretest; Group Statistics

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-corr	1	80	48.031	3.2221	.3602
	2	80	48.131	2.6347	.2946

1=basic feedback; 2=comprehensive feedback. For the Pretest, the group statistics difference between G1 (basic feedback), M=48.03; SD=3.22 and G2 (comprehensive feedback), M=48.13; SD=2.63 was not significant, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre-corr	Equal variances assumed	3.214	.075	-.215	158	.830	-.1000	.4653	-1.0191	19.81

The p-value for the pretest is higher than 0.05 and the p-value for the posttest is also higher than 0.05. This means that the p-values for the pretest and posttest are statistically insignificant, at .830 and .942 respectively, which correlates positively with the fact that the means of G1 and G2 are also insignificantly different, both for the pretest and posttest.

The findings indicate that during the interval between the pretest and the posttest, participating students from both groups slightly improved their skills in identifying and correcting grammatical errors, as reflected in the mean score of

G1: pretest 48.03, posttest 48.52

G2: pretest 48.13, posttest 48.55

However, the Samples T-test results show that there was no significant difference between the two groups at the end of the experiment, thus invalidating the author's alternate hypothesis and supporting the null hypothesis.

Discussion

Consequently, looking at the results, this researcher can only conclude that there is *no statistically significant difference* between the scores of the pretest and posttest, with both participating groups showing that different techniques for grammatical corrective feedback do not result in improved error recognition and correction skills among L2 students. Also, it should be mentioned that the slight improvement shown by the posttest results of both groups, may not be attributed to the different techniques used but to the fact that during the semester all English IV students practice repeatedly error recognition and correction. In other words, while the value of grammatical accuracy improvement cannot be denied, the issue still remains as to whether or not grammar corrective feedback is what actually contributes to its development (Truscott, 1996).

Similarly, the Individual Samples T-test results show that no group outperformed the other leading to the conclusion that more explicit feedback does not help students much in improving their ability to recognize and correct errors. Remarkably, this researcher's null hypothesis that explicit, detailed and comprehensive correction feedback is not statistically significant in improving the students' ability to recognize and correct grammatical errors is supported by test results. Moreover, considering that the posttest mean scores of both groups are almost the same, it shows that comprehensive, detailed corrective feedback with examples and parallel situations, does not contribute to the improvement of students' accuracy in identifying and correcting grammatical errors.

At this point, it is interesting to investigate L2 students' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes on error correction in the writing class. At the end of the semester, after the posttest, all participants were given a questionnaire in order to assess their attitudes towards the two types of corrective feedback. For this questionnaire, the researcher has selected three questions with the aim of understanding how the groups of participating students felt about their corrected paragraphs (Popovici, 2012, 2018):

-Feedback with marking of the errors plus corrected forms given is sufficient

-Marking of the errors plus comprehensive correction feedback with explanation, examples and parallel situations is necessary

-What do you do with the corrected paper: Do you study and practice each correction so that you can improve?

With the answers obtained from the questionnaire, the findings showed that most students wanted their teachers to mark and correct their errors and believed that error correction was the teacher's responsibility. To be exact, 69% wanted basic feedback with marking of the errors plus corrected forms

given, and 81% claimed that marking of the errors plus comprehensive correction feedback with explanations, examples and parallel situations was necessary. In other words, the vast majority of students want their errors to be comprehensively corrected. However, when asked what they do with the corrected paper, whether they study and practice each correction so that they can improve, most of them answered that they do nothing.

Conclusion

This research is part of the on-going debate over the usefulness of grammatical corrective feedback in L2 writing classes. Over the past four decades, both sides of the debate have scored significant points mostly because of Truscott's (1996, 1999, 2004, 2007) claim that corrective feedback is unnecessary and even counterproductive, on one side, and Ferris' (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004) position strongly arguing in favor of grammatical error correction, on the other side.

Although in recent years, support for error correction has increased, suggesting that comprehensive CF is a useful educational tool that teachers can use to help L2 learners improve their written accuracy over time, arguments that learning gains resulting from corrective feedback on a written paragraph are not entirely supported by research results. Improvements made during the semester are not evidence of the effectiveness of correction for improving learners' writing ability.

This result is not entirely surprising to this researcher rather it reflects an observation over a long period of teaching in Thailand and Japan. Students claim, rather pretend, they want to improve their accuracy in recognizing and correcting grammatical errors, and that corrective feedback can help them achieve this goal, however, this claim is not supported by the test results which show that different corrective techniques employed by teachers make little difference, if any.

To conclude, this researcher will try to provide an explanation for the poor results of these tests. This research has been done in Thailand where English is a school subject required in every school and most universities. It is mandatory for students to be able to pass many English tests in order to get to higher levels of education, or to graduate. So, students study English because they have to, not because they want to; their concern is the test result/score, not improvement of their accuracy, they only want to know whether their score is passing or not. For this reason, the corrective feedback in any form will not be of much interest to them, let alone inspire them to study and practice each corrected form. For this researcher, a new challenge would be a similar study set in an environment, a language school perhaps, where students register because they truly want to improve their grammatical correctness. In the meantime, though, this researcher will continue to investigate the issue of grammatical corrective feedback more from Truscott's side, and answer the question from the title of this paper with: *not much good*.

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