Delayed Effect of Teachers' Error Correction on EFL Students' Ability in Self-Correction in Writing: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the delayed effect of the error correction on EFL students' ability in self-correcting their own writing errors. It intends to find out whether the instructor's explicit oral and written error feedback, followed by students' extensive revisions, has any sustaining effect on students' ability in correcting and revising their errors in their own writing pieces. A group of twelve non-English major EFL college students from Taiwan participated in this study. The results indicated that the delayed effect of error feedback on students' ability in self- correction was non-significant. Most of the errors, after given extensive feedback and revision, remained uncorrected two months later. The result of this case study tends to support the claim that error feedback does not help EFL students in self-correcting their own errors. Other findings regarding students' attitude and interpretation towards their own repeated grammatical errors and teachers' error feedback are discussed.

Keywords: delayed effect, error correction, self-correction

1. Introduction:

Error correction, particularly grammar correction in writing has long been practiced in L1 writing and the use of it in L2 writing has always been regarded as essential since there are simply more grammatical problems involved in L2 students' writing texts. This unconditional acceptance and practice of grammar correction has been first and foremost challenged since Truscott published his 1996 article, "The case against grammar correction in L2 Writing", which claimed that "grammar correction has no place in writing classes and should be abandoned" (p. 361). Ever since, there has been rigorous debate among scholars on whether or how to give teacher commentary and grammatical error feedback in L2 students' writing (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2007; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007).

In the atmosphere of this heated dispute for the last decade, the only consensus has been reached is that more carefully designed, and well controlled experiments are needed before either partywould be convinced otherwise regarding effectiveness of error feedback. Before that, writing teachers can patiently and carefully examine two polarized views and try to understand their underlying rationales. By doing so, writing teachers can be more resourceful in deciding on their own eclectic approach in the classroom based on their own perceived needs of their own students. In addition, the writer of this paper intends to take on a more active role in investigating whether teachers' error feedback help EFL students self-correct their grammatical errors in writing. A small- scale case study is thus conducted to examine the delayed effect of error correction on EFL students' ability in self-correcting or self-revising their writing errors.

It is hypothesized in this study that if the instructor's error feedback provided an effective means for students to notice their errors, students should be able to correct their own errors on their original writing pieces regardless of the delayed time effect. That is, if these errors were teachable, students should be able to notice, identify and correct these same errors accordingly. Given the limitation regarding the design (i.e., lack of experimental group) and the scale (i.e., only twelve participants) of this study, the results would represent "tentative rather than definitive answers" (Allwright et al., 1988, p.250) to the hypothesis proposed in the study. Nevertheless, the results do provide some insights on the issues at stake for every writing teacher the effectiveness of error feedback, and the discussion on how writing teachers should react to students' grammatical errors in their compositions.

Research questions:

1. Does the instructor's explicit error feedback help EFL students self- correct their grammatical errors in writing?
2. What are participating students' perceptions and interpretations of the results of their own performance in this study?
3. What are participating students' attitudes and preferences towards the effectiveness of teachers' error feedback in English writing?

2. Review of Literature:

Since Truscott published his 1996 article, "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes", debate has been heatedly generated ever since. Concluded from studies done by Kepner (1991), Semke (1984), Robb et al (1986), and Sheppard (1992), Truscott argued that error correction, specifically grammar correction, was "not only unhelpful in these studies but actually hinders the learning process" (Truscott, 1996, p.333).

Truscott's argument was based on two grounds (1996, 1999, 2007). First, he believed that the nature of correction process was basically incongruent with SLA development processes. According to Truscott, grammar correction dealt with only the surface grammatical problems without tapping into L2 learners' developmental underlying system. He claimed that grammar correction, acting as transfer of knowledge, only resulted in "pseudolearning", since research showed that interlanguage development of certain forms took relatively a long time (Truscott, 1996, p.345). Thus, the fact that grammar correction does not result in positive effect on the accuracy of L2 students' writing should be expected. In addition, Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004) outlined the practical problems and possible negative side effects in teachers' giving and students' receiving error feedback. Problems such as teachers' failure to notice errors, teachers' inability to explain the grammatical rules, and students' confusion regarding the feedback were examples to be named a few. Based on these arguments, Truscott reached the conclusion that error correction was harmful and therefore, should be abandoned in the practice of L2 writing (1996, 1999, 2007).

Truscott certainly challenged the very core belief held for as long as it has been regarding error correction in L2 writing. Among all, Ferris refuted most rigorously with Truscott's point of view. Ferris (1999, 2001, 2004, 2007) pointed out that Truscott compared studies different in nature; thus, the conclusion generated from such incompatible studies was premature and overstrong. She also believed that Truscott overstated negative evidence and disregarded the research findings contradicting to his thesis (Ferris, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2007). In fact, it was further pointed out by Ferris (1999) that teachers should continue correcting grammatical errors because:1) L2 students wanted it, 2)students needed to produce academic text with manageable errors to proceed to mainstream curriculum, and 3) students should become self-sufficient in editing. For these reasons, Ferris strongly believed writing teachers should continue correcting L2 students' writing errors until substantial research proved harmful for its existence.

In fact, Ferris (2004, p.55) argued that although the controlled and longitudinal studies "did not reliably demonstrate the efficacy of error feedback", the existing research evidence pointed out the continuing use of error feedback in the classroom. Aside from the reasons addressed above, Ferris (2004) indicated that error correction, particularly focusing on the language form, was strongly suggested on its importance in SLA research (e.g., Doughy & Varela, 1998; Doughty& Williams, 1998: Ellis, 1998; James, 1998; Lightbown, 1998). These studies strongly suggested that problematic language forms should be made salient to adult language learners so that they could avoid fossilization which might hinder their further language development. It's thus claimed by Ferris (2004) that error feedback should be continuously practiced and would receive its effectiveness pedagogically by varying feedback types in accordance with nature of errors, by giving supplemental grammar instruction at the time in need, by error charting, and by teaching students' how to self-edit. Ferris (2007) also pointed out the importance in preparing pre-service and in-service teachers to effectively respond to student writing. She believed that a "selective, prioritized, individualized" approach to responding to student errors would be more effective and realistic to help with L2 students' writing (Ferris, 2007, p.170).

Investigations were also probed into the effects of different feedback strategies on improved accuracy in L2 students' writing. However, by using a meta-analysis to see the actual effect size of error correction, Truscott (2007) re-examined some of the controlled experiments (Sheppard, 1992; Kepner, 1991; Smeke; 1980, 1984;

Fazio; 2001; Polio et al. 1998), and found the effect size shown in these studies were "merely ineffective or mildly harmful" (p.p. 262-263)", regardless of the various types of feedbacks were given. In examining the additional evidence which looked at the "absolute gains by corrected students" without control groups for comparison (Lalande, 1982; Chandler 2003, Fazio, 2001; Polio et al. ,1998; Bitchener et al., 2005; Ferris , 2006), only Chandler's study (2003) yielded significant effect size of error feedback on students' L2 writing. However, Truscott (2007) argued that cautions should be made in attributing observed gains to correction alone. "Avoidance", for instance, might explain students' improved accuracy since students might produce simpler text in avoiding errors made in writing text (Truscott, 2007, p.269). Thus, according to Truscott (2004), Chandler's study did not offer evidence on the effectiveness of grammar correction and its results could only be "conjectures" (Truscott, 2004, p.342).

Regarding the issue of variability questioned by Ferris, Truscott argued that when similar result could be drawn upon from different studies, its generalization was even more powerful, and it pointed out that "the phenomenon is a general one - error correction still does not work" (2007, p.114). As for the students' belief regarding error correction, Truscott claimed that this false faith was based on intuition and it has been reinforced by teachers' error correction (Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007).

To summarize, this literature review has presented the existing, very polarizing views regarding the effect of grammar correction on EFL students' accuracy in writing. Writing teachers in the field should have thorough understanding of these different ideologies and rationales behind grammar correction. It would then be feasible for them to assume their positions, based on the existing literature and possibly on their carefully conducted research in the language classrooms.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Participants:

Twelve students participated in this study were non-English major students from a university in Northern Taiwan. Nine female and three male students from a general English class participated voluntarily in this study. These students have studied English for ten to twelve years. As for students' language proficiency level, their average TOEIC score was 520, ranged from the 660 to 480. Thus, participants were equipped with intermediate level of English language proficiency.

3.2 Design of the study and data collection procedures:

The delayed effect of explicit grammatical error feedback on EFL students' ability in self-correction was examined in this study. Participants were given a writing topic, **"My most unforgettable experience during childhood…"**, and were assigned to write a one page long, double spaced composition in class. After the composition was completed, students were then given explicit grammatical error feedback in one-on-one tutorial session from the instructor to clarify their grammatical errors. According to the error feedback, participants then revise their first draft accordingly. Two months after, students' self-corrections on their original writing pieces were conducted and collected as final drafts. The errors made on the first drafts and final drafts were categorized and calculated for comparison.

This study has adopted the error codes designed by Ferris et al., (2001), and six error categories: verbs errors (V), noun-ending errors (NE), article errors (ART), wrong word (WW), sentence structure (SS), and punctuation errors (PUNC) were used to categorize the errors for the analysis of this study (See Appendix). These error codes were not given explicitly for students' self-correction but were used later for the purpose of comparison and data analysis. Explicit error feedback on grammatical errors was given to individual student's one-on-one writing conference. Thus, both written and oral feedbacks were provided to each participant in the study.

Finally, students were given the opportunity to compare the errors made on their first drafts and final drafts, and were asked to elaborate on their opinions for:1) their biggest problems in six categories adopted in this study, 2) their own interpretations of the result of revision, and 3) their opinions for the effectiveness of grammatical error correction. A questionnaire and oral interview were adopted in this study as means of obtaining participants' background information, learning experiences in composition classes, and reaction and interpretation towards the correction results.

4. Results

Students' first and final drafts were collected for error analysis. For the first and final drafts, all the errors were classified as categories mentioned above. The total number of errors made in each category by all the participants for their first and final drafts were listed below.

The results showed that for the first drafts, participating students made most errors in the category of SS (122 in total). It was then closely followed by V (121), WW (87), PUNC (26), ART (15), and finally NE (13). As for the final drafts, the total number of errors made in each category by all the participants were V (103), SS (97), WW (73), PUNC (25), ART (14), and NE (11). From the comparison of the errors made from the first and final drafts, it was apparent that punctuation errors, article errors and noun ending errors made on the first drafts were hardly identified and corrected on the final drafts. As for the other three categories (verb errors, word choice errors, and sentence structure errors), the total number of errors made in these categories were reduced, but not in any significant manner. In total, the number of errors accurately identified and corrected from first drafts in the sentence structure category was only 25 out of 122, followed by verb category 18/121, and finally word choice 14/87 (See Table 1).

To sum up, the delayed effect of the instructor's error feedback on students' ability in self-editing their own writing errors was insignificant in this study. The extensive error feedback and revisions done previously did not seem to have any delayed effect on students' ability in self-correcting their errors, since most of the students were either unable to identify or were able to identify but failed to correct their errors.

Table1: Number of errors made in each category on first and final drafts by participants

	V	NE	ART	WW	SS	PUNC	Total
First draft errors: Total numbers	121	13	15	87	122	26	384
Final draft errors: Total numbers	103	11	14	73	97	25	323
Total number of errors reduced:	18	**2**	**1**	14	25	**1**	51

(Numbers in each category are the sum total of all participating students.)

As for the information obtained from interviews, most students indicated that SS errors were the most problematic part for them. From the analysis of student texts, most SS errors were resulted from errors made in sentence and clause boundaries such as run-on sentences and comma splices. Unidiomatic sentence construction resulted from direct translation from Chinese also made up big parts of SS errors. Participants also indicated that WW errors were the other challenging part for them, since these errors could be caused by unfamiliarity with word or idiomatic usages. As for the misuses in verb forms, students indicated that they were able to understand them during the writing tutorial session but still were not able to revise them on the final drafts.

Regarding students' perceptions and interpretations of the results for their own performance in this study, most students believed the reason that they did poorly in self- correction on the final drafts was because they did not attend closely to their original revisions. Some of the students indicated that if they had spent more time in studying more grammar, they would have made fewer errors. Others believed that if they could be given more time to reflect upon their own errors, there would be more errors identified and corrected on the final drafts. From the interviews, almost all participants pointed out that grammar correction was important, regardless of their own unsatisfactory performance on the final drafts of this study. Most students believed that although there were only very few errors identified and corrected on the final drafts, the practice of grammar correction should be continued. Some students believed that it should continue unconditionally because it might work one day. Others believed grammar correction should be effective because they were more aware of some of their errors, although they did not yet know how to correct them. When students were specifically asked if they would carefully attend to all the grammar feedback provided by their English composition teachers, some students indicated that they were sometimes frustrated by the extensive feedback from their teacher and decided to overlook them if no revisions were required afterwards. Others indicated that some teachers' error feedbacks were confusing either because of their illegible handwriting or because of the incomprehensible grammatical corrections.

5. Discussion

The results of this study revealed that the delayed effect of teachers' error correction on students' self-correction or self-revision was insignificant.

For noun ending errors, article errors, and punctuation errors, participants' total numbers of error reduction were too few for discussion. As for errors made in sentence structure, verb, and wrong word categories, the total number of errors did reduce, but the number of reduction was also insignificant. The result of the current study revealed that the instructor's explicit and extensive error feedback did not seem to help participants' self-correction in their own L2 writing. Thus, the result was more in line with Truscott's argument that error correction did not help students' accuracy in L2 writing (1996, 1999, 2004, 2007).

As for students' perceived problems in sentence structure and wrong word categories, some of the errors made were global errors which were the result of interlingual influences, as participants indicated that those problematic expressions were the product of direct translation from their L1 (Chinese). Other errors in this category such as comma splice, sentence fragments and run-on sentences were mostly indicative of students' insufficient knowledge of English syntax. In fact, some students pointed out in the interview that even the very explicit grammatical feedback for these errors was very often hard for them to understand. Apparently, when students' target language development did not reach a certain level, to comprehend these grammatical corrections might just be too difficult a task to accomplish. Thus, the poor results of the final draft revision could be expected since most error feedback might not correspond to students' current level of L2 language development.

In addition, the difference between acquisition and learning proposed by Krashen (1981, 1982) may also provide possible explanations for students' poor performance on their final drafts in this study. Some participating students revealed they were able to notice and had learned how to correct their own errors according to the grammar feedback provided by their instructor. However, these learned knowledge did not make its way to the final revisions as most of the errors remained in the final drafts. This corresponds to Krashen's claim (1982) that learning cannot become acquisition, which may explain why students repeatedly made the same mistakes since they never truly acquired those forms of language. This phenomenon might be further interpreted by Ellis' (1997) model of language acquisition that students did notice their errors when explicit error feedback was given. However, the "operations" only stayed in their short- term memory as "intake" and were not successfully integrated in the long-term memory in their developing interlanguage system and thus students failed to produce satisfactory output in making proper corrections on their final revisions (Ellis, 1997, p.119).

As for students' attitude and perception towards error correction, it was vividly portrayed in the students' reaction in the questionnaire that it was simply "faith" on error correction which made them believe it would work for them. As Truscott (1966) pointed out that most of the error corrections were practiced in isolated points without reference to learners' current linguistic developmental system or stage. Error correction, under this circumstance, was only "transfer of knowledge" and could only result in "pseudolearning " (Truscott, 1996, p.347). In fact, it was further elaborated by Truscott (2004) that by using error correction, students' false faith was reinforced by their writing teachers. This viewpoint could be validated from students' faithful attitude towards error correction obtained from this study.

Finally, it is worth noting that students' attitude towards grammar correction might not be congruent with their "language ego" (Guiora et al., 1972b). As Brown (2000) elaborated on its relation to second language learning, adult learners were more aware of language forms, were less willing to go through the trial-and-error process for its potential threat to their self-concept, and were therefore more defensive in learning a new language. Under this circumstance, when an adult learner was given explicit grammar correction, especially in an extensive manner, it created enormous threat to his/her language ego and consequently these error feedback would be overlooked and ignored in order to preserve his/her fragile language ego. This also explained that most participants in this study perceived grammar corrections from composition teachers as necessary, but they resisted in paying close attention to those corrections upon receiving them. The nature of grammar correction seems potentially in conflict with adult L2 learners' language ego and hence, the effectiveness of grammar correction becomes questionable.

6. Conclusion:

It can therefore be concluded from this case study that delayed effect of error correction on students' ability in self-correcting their own writing errors is not significant.

This result can possibly be explained by that students' "problems created by developmental sequences" cannot be overcome by direct "transfer of knowledge" from their teachers, since students might not yet be capable of comprehending these error feedback (Truscott, 1996, p.347).

The difference of acquisition and learning might also account for some students' unsatisfactory results in their final revisions since most of the participants have never truly acquired these forms of target language into their interlanguage system. Finally, the issue of language ego, especially for L2 adult learners, cannot be overlooked since it surely does posit the psychological barrier to come across for one to truly acquire the target language.

Due to the limited scale of this study, the result cannot be generative. However, it does provide some insights on the possible explanations of why error correction, particularly explicit grammar correction, does not help with EFL students' self-correction in writing errors. It should also be noted that other types of feedback, such as indirect or coded feedback was not employed in this case study; therefore, the result cannot speak for the effect of other types of feedback on students' ability in self-revision.

Thus, how can writing teachers help EFL students improve their writing in the classroom? Since grammatical error correction has long been adopted and has not been proven to be working effectively in many occasions, it might be time for writing teachers to adopt a more revision-free environment for their students. Teachers' feedback can be more focused on the overall fluency or clarity of content in students' writing. As for the grammatical error feedback, they should be kept in minimum and be reserved for only those interfering with the meanings that students wish to convey. In addition, the connection of reading and writing is too important to be overlooked as Grabe (2003, p.242) pointed out that "reading and writing reinforce or accelerate the learning of content, the development of literacy skills and the acquisition of language abilities". Thus, instead of learning isolated language usage and discrete grammatical points, students should be provided with abundant language input and should be encouraged to read extensively. By means of providing contextualized language input, it is more likely for our students to truly acquire target language and reflect their solid and authentic knowledge and abilities in English writing.

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Appendix : Description of error categories for analysis

	Error Categories
Verb errors (V)	All errors in verb tense or from, including relevant subject-verb agreement errors.
Noun-ending errors (NE)	Plural or possessive ending incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary; includes relevant subject-verb agreement errors.
Article errors (ART)	Article or other determiner incorrect omitted, or unnecessary.
Wrong word (WW)	All specific lexical errors in word choice or word form, including preposition and pronoun errors. Spelling errors include only if the (apparent) misspelling resulted in an actual English word.
Sentence structure errors (SS)	Errors in sentence/clause boundaries (run-ons, fragments, comma splices), word order, omitted words or phrases, unnecessary words or phrases, other unidiomatic sentence construction.
Punctuation errors (PUNC)	Punctuation incorrect or missing