

The Effectiveness of Correcting Grammatical Errors in Writing Classes: An EFL Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

The role of grammar instruction to help students reduce errors in L2 writing is under debate: Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007) claims that error correction is largely ineffective and harmful, whereas Ferris (1997, 1999, 2004) argues that students need feedback on their grammatical errors. Grammar correction is considered to be one of the most important forms of feedback. This paper examines the role of grammar correction in L2 writing on the basis of these controversies and discusses some pedagogical implications of error correction for teaching writing, with particular reference to my own experience of teaching EFL writing classes in South Korea.

Introduction¹

In L2 writing, the role of grammar instruction as a way of decreasing the number of errors has been hotly debated. In particular, Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007) claims that error correction is largely ineffective and harmful, whereas Ferris (1997, 1999, 2004) argues that students require feedback on their grammatical errors. My experiences teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) writing at the college level both introduced me to the issue of whether or not to correct grammatical errors and led to my position, which is that grammar and spelling correction is one of the most important forms of feedback, though the type and role of feedback will differ according to students' proficiency.

When I taught English composition for beginners in South Korea, students sought a great deal of support in grammar instruction. Many advanced English language learners (ELLS) still valued supplemental grammar instruction to help build their editing skills, though most of them had good control of sentence-level grammar. Therefore, my pedagogical goals were to help students write effectively by teaching them rules and applications in a basic English composition course and by letting them read as many passages as possible in an advanced English composition course. I led a grammar-based writing class for the basic course, and a reading-based writing class for the advanced course. In the latter course, I employed reading as a way for students to practice elaborating on ideas in writing but also helped students build editing skills through feedback on grammar issues.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Sharon Pugh for her valuable comments on early drafts of this paper.

In this paper, I will present some teaching ideas related to the following research question based on my experience as an EFL teacher: if it is true that ELLs really want and benefit from feedback on their grammatical errors, what is the most effective way to teach EFL writing and to promote students' development of grammatical knowledge? In order to answer this guiding question, the role of grammar correction in L2 written texts will be thoroughly examined on the basis of the controversies that surround this issue. My teaching experience of English composition in South Korea will also be provided as supporting evidence. Finally, some pedagogical implications of error correction in teaching writing will be discussed, especially with respect to my own experience of teaching EFL writing classes in South Korea. However, because this is a literature review, I will not focus on concrete classroom examples but rather on underlying principles in order to establish a foundation for my future research.

Controversies over Error Correction

Scholars take different positions on the subject of error correction. While some discourage error correction, others see value in it. Still others take a middle ground and support error correction in certain circumstances, but not in others. Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007) has consistently claimed that error correction is harmful and should be abandoned, emphasizing that the fact that students clearly request grammar correction does not imply that teachers should provide it for them. Even if benefits from error correction actually exist, Truscott (2007) still concludes that the harmful effects on students' writing ability are greater. He argues that students who receive no error correction have more positive attitudes toward writing than those who receive error feedback (see also Hillocks, 1986), so even though students without error correction are not better writers, their better attitudes encourage them to write more, resulting in more opportunities to improve their performance than students with error correction.

Polio, Fleck, and Leder (1998) agree with Truscott's position, finding that students who receive error correction are not any better at writing accurate texts than those who do not receive any error feedback. In other words, their study shows that error correction does not help learners make improvements in their grammar and word choice. Fazio's (2001) research shows no significant change in students' accuracy in spelling as a consequence of error correction. Similarly, in a study of twenty-five Dutch high school seniors learning L2 French, Dekeyser (1993) reported that error correction has no positive effect on L2 grammar knowledge.

In contrast to Truscott, Polio, and his colleagues, Fazio, and Dekeyser, a body of research provides evidence that students who receive error feedback from teachers improve the accuracy and overall quality of their writing over time. Ferris (1999) critiqued Truscott's claim that grammar correction should be abandoned, supporting error correction in L2 writing classes through her own previous research findings and teaching experiences. She encouraged language teachers to listen to ELLs and to consider their needs before deciding what and how to provide feedback on error correction. Earlier Ferris (1997) found that summary comments

on grammar, longer comments (e.g., 16-25 words),² and text-specific comments led to positive changes and improvement in the quality of students' papers. Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) have also argued that grammar and editing feedback can be helpful to most students in improving the accuracy of their writing. Moreover, a study by Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) demonstrates that a combination of written and conference feedback can help upper-intermediate L2 writers improve the accuracy of grammatical features, such as the past simple tense and the definite article.

Similarly, Fathman and Walley (1990) claimed that feedback from teachers that focuses on grammatical errors as well as content is effective in improving student writing. According to these scholars, when teachers underlined grammatical errors found in the writing, students showed significant improvement in grammatical accuracy, and encouraging or suggesting comments were also helpful in improving the content of their writing. Fathman and Whalley (1990) found that if grammatical errors are underlined in addition to general comments on content, students can significantly improve both grammar and content in their writing. Ferris and Roberts (2001) found that the group who received feedback significantly outperformed the no-feedback group on a self-editing task.³

Earlier, Krashen (1982) pointed out that too much error correction has little effect on language acquisition. In keeping with his basic theoretical stance, he asserted that errors should be corrected when the goal is learning rather than acquisition, but not in every case.⁴ He emphasized that not all grammatical errors need to be corrected and that there should be no error correction in informal conversation, so as not to interfere with communication. Krashen did allow for error correction on written texts and grammar exercises under the following conditions: (a) when rules are learnable; (b) under Monitor use;⁵ and (c) when students are "Monitor-users" (p. 119).

Rather than a choice between correcting or not correcting errors, emphasis is generally on the most effective ways to provide such feedback. In particular, Kroll (2001) has warned that teachers should not allow the presence of language problems to change a writing course to a grammar course and that errors should be dealt with at an appropriate stage of writing. For example, teachers' correction of grammatical errors on first drafts can have negative effects on students' writing by

² Ferris (1997) mentioned that longer comments can be more helpful in revising students' writing because they give more explicit feedback.

³ However, Ferris and Roberts (2001) concluded that less explicit feedback helps students self-edit.

⁴ Krashen claims that language acquisition differs from language learning, and that the two have no interface. Language acquisition is defined as the "subconscious process" of using the language through communication, whereas language learning is defined as "conscious knowledge" of a second language attained through formal instruction of the language's grammars or rules (Krashen, 1982, p. 10). Hence, grammar instruction helps language learning, but not acquisition.

⁵ According to Krashen (1982), the consciously learned language acts as a "Monitor" (p. 15). The Monitor detects errors to correct incorrect utterances. For example, a language learner begins an utterance and the Monitor edits the utterance.

drawing their attention away from other necessary revisions. Additionally, Weaver (1996) has pointed out that if students cannot draw on their grammatical knowledge when they need to edit, and if they do not have enough time to edit their writing carefully, the formal study of grammar might not transfer naturally to students' writing. Keeping such caveats in mind but without losing sight of the importance of promoting students' development of grammatical knowledge, in the following section, I will discuss a balanced approach to the teaching of EFL writing with a focus on my experience in South Korea.

Considerations for Teaching EFL Writing Courses in South Korea

A growing body of research has focused on error correction in English as second language (ESL) contexts in which teachers provide error correction in students' L2 writing. English teachers face different challenges in EFL contexts, but the differences between teaching in ESL and EFL contexts are not adequately considered in English language teaching. Thus, we need to reconsider how the suggestions researchers have made on error correction are applicable to EFL contexts.

The issue of grammar correction presented itself in my own experience as an EFL writing teacher at a university in South Korea. When I was asked to teach a basic English composition course and an advanced English composition course simultaneously, I decided to teach a grammar-based writing class for the basic English composition course and a reading-based writing class for the advanced English composition course. My teaching goals were to help students engage in writing effectively by teaching them basic grammar in a basic English composition course and by exposing them to various reading texts in an advanced English composition course.

My pedagogy for the advanced English composition course can be supported by both theoretical claims and empirical studies that demonstrate significant correlations between reading and writing. Kern (2000) has claimed that reading and writing are "not singular, unitary constructs, but rather culture-, context-, and task-dependent constructs" (p. 63). Bossone and Troyka (1976) also reported significantly positive effects on writing ability on students' expository writing in English composition courses that integrate reading instruction and writing instruction. Likewise, Eckhoff's (1983) study found that children's writing included grammatical features found in their reading texts, suggesting that children may learn about language structures by being exposed to written texts, which may have a positive impact on their writing. Bélanger (1987) also mentioned that there is a link between reading achievement and writing performance and that skilled writers are usually able readers. A study by Elley and Mangubhai (1983) investigated the effect of systematic exposure to a rich variety of highly engaging illustrated story books on the general L2 language proficiency of elementary school children in the Fiji islands. They concluded that pleasure reading in L2 positively influences L2 writing in conditions where children strive for meaning and receive sufficient support for greater exposure to print in high-interest contexts. Moreover, Janopoulos (1986)

found a significant positive correlation between reading and writing in L2 and that proficiency levels for L2 reading and writing are closely related, especially in adult learners. He concluded that the amount of pleasure reading in L2 may be a reliable predictor of L2 writing proficiency.

On the other hand, regarding my experience as an EFL teacher in the basic English composition course, I expected that students would need to know about grammar in order to comprehend texts and to write accurately. Even now, I still believe that students need to develop their grammatical accuracy and that teaching grammar can make students better readers and writers (Hinkel, 2002). Some research points out the value of form-focused over non-form-focused instruction to improve learners' accuracy (Larsen-Freeman, 1995). Larsen-Freeman (1997) has further argued that grammar should be seen as a rational, dynamic system that is composed of structures characterized by the three dimensions of form, meaning, and use, rather than as a static system of arbitrary rules.

In my basic English composition class, I began by trying to understand students' needs for grammar instruction, which depended on their level of English proficiency and the extent of their prior exposure to English. Since most of my students were freshmen and many of them lacked confidence in academic writing, I focused mainly on very basic sentence patterns, including important sentence-level grammar such as tenses and word form (e.g., subject-verb agreement, verb-preposition agreement, and articles). In fact, my students felt that the appropriate use of English tenses was one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar.

At the beginning of the semester, I faced the risk of my basic writing course transforming into a grammar course, but I tried to make grammar instruction in my class appropriately simple and narrowly-focused while following my original course schedule (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2005). As Ellis (1993) has suggested, I viewed grammar teaching as consciousness-raising rather than as the practice of accurate production. I asked students to write various patterns, from sentences to paragraphs to short essays, on given topics, based on the grammar instruction they learned in class. I did not have any difficulty providing linguistic explanations of English grammar because I had studied it in depth for many years. However, a big problem with my class was that it was too large to give students individual feedback on their writing assignments at various stages of the writing process.

Particularly at the beginning, giving my students grammatical error-focused feedback on every single assignment was difficult because they made many mistakes with basic grammar and word choice. Although Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) have pointed out that such direct feedback is not directly related to the improvement of students' overall ability to write accurately, I was afraid that I could not help students systematically reduce the amount of grammatical errors in the time available (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2005).

Fortunately, my advanced English composition course was much smaller and was composed of students who had a higher level of English proficiency. Most were juniors and seniors. As the course progressed, I exposed my students to sufficient

reading in class or homework assignments ranging from simple passages to long complex texts. My strategy for the advanced composition class was related to Ruddell's (2005) definition of writing as "the act of constructing meaning while transacting with text" (p. 39). In other words, writers make meaning by combining prior knowledge, previous experience, and information emerging from new texts.

I also believed that reading in the EFL classroom could function as an appropriate input for the acquisition of writing skills. This belief comes from the claim that better L1 writers read more than poorer L1 writers, which shows a correlation between reading achievement and writing ability (Ryan, 1977; Krashen, 1984). Ryan (1977) reported that the parents of good writers frequently read to them as children and that these parents read more themselves (cited in Krashen, 1984). That study supports Krashen's (1984 & 1993) later claim that reading, especially when it is voluntary and pleasurable, contributes to the development of many aspects of writing ability. Eisterhold (1990) also affirmed that effective writing teachers are sensitive to the relationship between reading and writing.

Even in an advanced English composition course, I touched on problematic aspects of English grammar such as definite/indefinite articles and prepositions, which I perceived to be among the hardest parts of English grammar for Korean students to fully acquire. Generally, most of my students had good control of sentence-level grammar, but many students liked such supplemental grammar instruction to build their editing skills.⁶ It seemed to be true that learning particular grammatical distinctions requires a great deal of time even for the most skilled learners.

I tried to give students individual feedback on their writing on a regular basis. My students in the advanced English composition class still made some minor mistakes in sentence structures and word choice, but their writing skills were good or sometimes excellent. In retrospect, I regret that I did not know how to introduce self-editing strategies and peer-editing workshops at that time, which could have been helpful in improving more advanced student writing (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2005).

Overall, looking back on my English composition courses as an EFL teacher, I tried to provide students with tools for their continued growth as writers and for the successful fulfillment of their future academic writing through systematic grammar instruction (see Kroll, 2001). Compared to the beginning of the semester, many of my students in the basic and advanced composition classes came to feel more confident in academic writing through constant grammar instruction and extensive reading.

⁶ In general, it is argued that beginners need more grammar instruction than advanced learners. As Ellis (1984) mentions, however, it can be argued that grammar instruction better equips advanced learners because complex knowledge of the target language cannot be picked up after the occurrence of fossilization.

However, teaching the advanced course was much more difficult than teaching the basic course because teaching appropriate word choice and natural connections between paragraphs was more challenging. Highly proficient English learners still wanted to learn more about advanced grammar, but at times it was difficult for me to touch on subtle grammar points that usually require a native speakers' intuition to understand completely. In this regard, in order to effectively teach English writing courses to more than upper-intermediate students, EFL teachers need to make an effort to achieve high proficiency in English.

Pedagogical Implications for EFL Writing Classes

From my teaching experience in South Korea, I learned that emphasis on comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) is more relevant to advanced than to beginning learners, who prefer the support of explicit grammar instruction. Advanced students are ready to develop vocabulary and writing style through extensive reading (Krashen, 1993) along with opportunities to refine their knowledge of English grammar. Also, they are aware that grammatical accuracy plays a crucial role in evaluations of EFL students' writing (Hinkel 2002). As I experienced in my basic English composition class, overt instruction in grammar is important, especially for beginning-level learners because it can increase learners' exposure to language structure. However, when EFL writing teachers want to provide grammar instruction for students' writing, they should remember that (a) writing classes are not grammar classes; (b) explicit instruction should be based on an awareness of students' needs; and (c) effective grammar instruction includes short and narrowly-focused activities (Ferris & Fedgecock, 2005). Moreover, teachers should always remind students that grammatical errors are common in the writing process and discourage students from associating those errors with the quality of the writing.

Many teachers are not comfortable with allowing errors in the classroom, but meaningful errors are beneficial for students because they can learn language transfer or interruption through the repetitive patterns in their errors.⁷ In this case, correction is meaningful because students can learn why they make errors in specific contexts. When deciding whether to correct errors, EFL teachers should consider their goals and objectives for their students. If their goal is to create fluency and to help students feel comfortable speaking or writing, then teachers must be careful not to over-correct. If teachers point out too many errors, they may make students feel self-conscious and they may shut down. This is especially true when it comes to spelling. If teachers start covering the paper in red ink due to spelling mistakes, then students may become more fearful of writing and may stop trying new words or writing altogether. This greatly hinders development.

On the basis of my discussion in this paper, I can thus conclude that the most effective way of handling grammatical errors in helping EFL students develop their writing skills may be an inductive approach (see also Richard-Amato, 2003):

⁷ Language transfer or interruption can occur when EFL writers apply knowledge from their native language to English.

teachers can help students identify errors by underlining or circling words or phrases in which problems occur and students can identify their grammatical errors through their own grammatical knowledge. I agree with Frodesen's (2001) suggestions that, (a) indirect correction of errors should be provided; (b) teachers should focus on the errors that need the most attention rather than on all errors in writing; (c) teachers should consider many student variables, such as meta-linguistic knowledge and proficiency level, and the instructional situation; and (d) teachers can give feedback on errors in early drafts as well as in later stages of the writing process or in the last draft, according to students' needs and desires. In other words, teachers should help writers develop their linguistic knowledge, including grammatical systems, to convey ideas appropriately and meaningfully to readers. Because feedback on grammatical errors may become more difficult as linguistic complexity increases, it is important for EFL teachers to continue strengthening their own language resources for helping students.

Teachers' feedback, such as error correction in students' writing, is a very important issue in EFL settings because grammar correction represents one of the most crucial forms of feedback. If students are not given any feedback opportunities in a writing class, they have little reason to be there. Most EFL students are very interested in improving their writing skills. As I learned from my writing classes, it is desirable that a writing curriculum in EFL settings includes some grammar instruction for beginners as well as for advanced learners, with emphasis on different grammatical elements to help develop their writing abilities. However, the course need not be heavily grammar-oriented. Particularly from a process-based perspective, writing is "essentially learnt, not taught," and teachers should assist students "to express their own meanings through an encouraging and cooperative environment with minimal interference" (Hyland, 2003, p. 18).

Hence, in EFL writing classes, the strategies and processes involved in students' writing as well as the nature of learning should be considered. To do that, EFL teachers need to be cautious in deciding when, how, and which errors should be corrected, depending on the academic needs of the students and the pedagogical goals of the courses. Finally, since teaching in the EFL context is obviously different from teaching in the ESL context, teaching methodology and textbooks for writing classes need to be situated in contextual conditions (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999). In other words, EFL writing teachers should focus on students' needs and learning styles appropriate to the EFL context. My hope is to help EFL teachers understand how to teach students to be successful writers and to promote students' development of grammatical knowledge based on my previous experience as an EFL teacher in South Korea. Furthermore, I hope that my ideas of error correction for EFL writing classes can prompt discussion and further study.

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