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The “Grammar Correction” Debate in L2 Writing: Where are we, and where do we go from here? (and what do we do in the meantime . . .?)

Dana R. Ferris*

California State University, Sacramento, CA, USA

Abstract

The efficacy of teacher error/grammar correction in second language writing classes has been the subject of much controversy, including a published debate in an earlier volume of this journal [J. Second Language Writing 8 (1999) 1; J. Second Language Writing 8 (1999) 111]. In this paper, the state-of-the-art in error correction research in L2 writing is described (“Where are we?”), directions for future research are outlined (“Where do we go from here?”) and implications for current L2 composition pedagogy are suggested (“What do we do in the meantime?”). The primary thesis of the paper is that, despite the published debate and several decades of research activity in this area, we are virtually at Square One, as the existing research base is incomplete and inconsistent, and it would certainly be premature to formulate any conclusions about this topic. Thus, findings from previous research on this controversial yet ubiquitous pedagogical issue are recast as “predictions” about what future research might discover, rather than “conclusions” about what the previous research shows us.
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In 1996, Professor John Truscott published a review essay in the journal *Language Learning* called “The Case Against Grammar Correction In L2 Writing Classes.” Because it was published in a major research journal and because Truscott took such a strong position—error correction is harmful and should be abolished—the paper immediately got a lot of attention and was the source of commentary and controversy at conferences and in journal articles. As part of a colloquium on ESL grammar and writing issues at the 1998 TESOL Convention, I presented a brief paper which offered a rebuttal to Truscott’s strong stance. This conference paper was later published as an article in the *Journal of Second*

*Tel.: +1-916-278-5725; fax: +1-916-278-5410.

Language Writing (Ferris, 1999). Then the *JSLW* editors solicited and published Truscott's response to my paper (Truscott, 1999).

Here is the essence of the published debate: Truscott claimed that the error correction research in L2 writing was conclusive in demonstrating that grammar correction was ineffective in facilitating improvement in student writing. In my rebuttal, I argued that the research base was far from complete and conclusive on that question. I also argued that Truscott had overlooked or understated some potentially positive research evidence on the effects of grammar correction. Finally, Truscott had made the observation in his 1996 article that although students clearly want grammar correction, that does not mean teachers should give it to them. I offered the opinion in response that L2 writing students' strongly stated desires for error feedback could not so easily be dismissed or ignored.

Truscott's (1999) response to my rebuttal essentially reiterated his previous conclusions. I would say that the only two points on which he and I agreed are (a) that the research base on error correction in L2 writing is indeed insufficient and (b) that the "burden of proof" is on those who would argue *in favor* of error correction (see also Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998). At that point, since we both agreed that more research was necessary, I decided to stop debating and go and do some more research! In this paper, I will outline some of my own current thinking about the previous research that has been completed and attempt to articulate answers to two questions regarding research on grammar correction in L2 writing: (1) Where are we? (2) Where do we go from here?

Where are we?

Since 1999, I have done a considerable amount of both primary and secondary research work on the issues surrounding error correction in L2 writing (see Ferris, 2002, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). In addition to completing two new studies of my own, I have critically re-examined all of the studies reviewed by Truscott (as well as other studies he did not discuss) and looked at new research which has appeared since the publication of Truscott's original review. This secondary analysis has led me to three major observations as to the "state of the art" in error correction research, discussed in turn: (1) the research base on the "big question"—does error feedback help L2 student writers?—is inadequate; (2) the previous studies on error correction are fundamentally incomparable because of inconsistencies in design; and (3) existing research *predicts* (but certainly does not conclusively *prove*) positive effects for written error correction.

Observation 1: The existing research base does not adequately address the big question: Does error feedback help L2 student writers? At the beginning of his review of previous studies of written error correction, Truscott establishes evaluation criteria as follows:

The researchers compare the writing of students who have received grammar correction over a period of time with that of students who have not. If correction is important for learning, then the former students should be better writers, on the average, than the latter. If the abilities of the two groups do not differ, then correction is not helpful. The third possibility, of course, is that the uncorrected students will write better than the corrected ones—in which case, correction is apparently harmful. (1996, p. 329, emphasis added)

Table 1

Summary of research findings: What does the available research evidence demonstrate about the effectiveness of error correction in L2 writing classes

Research question	Studies and findings
Do students who receive error correction produce more accurate texts than those who receive no error feedback?	Yes: Ashwell (2000), Fathman and Whalley (1990), Ferris and Roberts (2001), Kepner (1991) No: Polio et al. (1998) Unclear: Semke (1984)
Do students who receive error correction improve in accuracy over time?	Yes: Chandler (2003), Ferris (1995a, 1997), Ferris and Helt (2000), Frantzen (1995), Lalande (1982), Robb et al. (1986), Sheppard (1992) No: Cohen and Robbins (1976), Polio et al. (1998) Unclear: Semke (1984)

This appears to be a straightforward assertion and a reasonable starting point for a review and an argument. But the surprising truth is that *very few studies of error correction in L2 writing actually “compare the writing of students who have received grammar correction over a period of time with that of students who have not.”* While there are a number of studies which compare the effects of different *methods* of error correction with one another, it is, in fact, extremely rare for researchers to compare “correction” versus “no correction” in L2 student writing. The reason for that is likely fairly obvious: Most teachers feel that they have an ethical dilemma. Unless they are already *sure* that error feedback does not help students and may in fact harm them, it feels unethical to withhold it from their students simply for research purposes. Add to that the fact that students most likely will rebel and complain and lose confidence in them if they do not give them feedback on their errors, and it is hard to find many teachers who would consider participating in these types of research efforts (or supervisors who would allow it).

To be more precise, in my own recent review of the literature, I found only six studies (three of which appeared *after* Truscott’s original review) that actually examine the “correction/no correction” comparison (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Kepner, 1991; Polio et al., 1998; Semke, 1984), and only two of the six (Kepner, 1991; Polio et al., 1998) make the comparison over “a period of time.” Of those six studies, three clearly report evidence in favor of the helpfulness of error correction (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001); one finds positive evidence for error correction but curiously interprets it as negative (Kepner, 1991); one is inconclusive because of missing information (Semke, 1984); and one provides support for Truscott’s thesis by reporting no advantage for error correction (Polio et al., 1998)¹ (see Table 1).

Observation 2: The studies in the research base are fundamentally incomparable because of inconsistencies in design. Both before my 1999 response to Truscott and afterwards, I was struck by how different the various error correction studies were from one another. They varied on just about every research parameter imaginable: subject char-

¹For a more detailed analysis of these studies (and others examining error correction), see Ferris (2003, Chap. 3) and Ferris (2002, Chap. 2).

acteristics (for instance, American college foreign language students versus ESL students versus EFL students), size of samples and treatment groups, duration of treatment or study period, types of writing being considered, types of feedback being given, who was providing the error feedback, how errors were defined and how accuracy and improvement were measured.

As one reviewer² of an earlier version of this paper noted, this point is a reiteration of my previous rebuttal to Truscott (Ferris, 1999). In Truscott's (1999) response, he countered that this observation strengthened, rather than weakened, his argument: "... generalization is most reasonable *when similar results are obtained under a variety of conditions*" (p. 114, emphasis added). The anonymous reviewer similarly noted, "This ... actually strengthens Truscott's argument. *Replicating research in different contexts* is a good thing" (emphasis added). Though both comments are true as far as they go, in my view, both miss the point in this particular instance. First, as discussed above, "similar results" were *not* reported in the studies reviewed by Truscott (1996) or by me (Ferris, 2002, 2003). The brief discussion of the six studies outlined in Table 1 provides an illustration of this assertion. If it were indeed true that many dissimilar studies pointed to the same result, Truscott would have an excellent point. But it is not. Not only do they report dissimilar findings, but they are not even asking the same questions to begin with.

Second, none of the studies constitute "replication" of others by any stretch of the imagination. If similar designs (as to the types of writing being considered, the types of errors being addressed, and the ways in which improvement or lack thereof were measured) had been employed across a variety of contexts and learners, then we might be able to make some reliable generalizations. But this is not the case. The studies compare apples and oranges (and pears, and grapes, and nectarines ...).

A brief comparison (see Table 2) of several often-cited studies may be helpful here as an example. The four studies summarized in Table 2 (Kepner, 1991; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984) are roughly comparable in that they were all longitudinal (ranging from a 10-week quarter to a nine-month academic year), had respectable numbers of subjects (ranging from 60 to 141), and examined foreign language students rather than ESL students (German and Spanish foreign language students in U.S. universities; EFL students at a Japanese university).

However, the designs of the studies differ substantially in other ways: (1) the types of student writing being considered (free-form journal entries versus expository essays); (2) whether or not there was a requirement for student revision after corrections were given; (3) who gave the error feedback (the researcher versus one instructor versus several different instructors); (4) how the error feedback was given; (5) whether or not particular error types were specified and operationalized for the research; (6) whether or not there was a control group; (7) whether or not there was a baseline or pretest measure; and (8) the nature of the posttest measure (e.g., a 10-min freewrite versus a journal entry written at home versus a complete essay).

Further, the findings are different in each case: (1) Kepner (1991) found that students who received error feedback on their journal entries made 15% fewer errors than those who

²I want to express appreciation here to both of the anonymous *JSLW* reviewers, whose comments pushed my thinking and (I hope) sharpened and focused my arguments.

Table 2
A comparison of four studies

Study	Kepner (1991)	Lalande (1982)	Robb et al. (1986)	Semke (1984)
Number of subjects	60 (two groups)	60 (two groups)	134 (four groups)	141 (four groups)
Duration of study	One semester	One quarter	Academic year	One quarter
Context	Spanish FL students at U.S. university	German FL students at U.S. university	EFL students at Japanese university	German FL students at U.S. university
Main research question	Differences between groups receiving error correction or message-related comments	Differences between groups receiving direct or indirect correction	Differences across groups receiving four types of error correction	Differences across groups receiving four types of comments/corrections
Control (no error feedback) group used?	Yes	No	No	Yes
Pretest/posttest design?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes, but pretest results not reported
Type of student writing studied?	Journal entries	Essays	Essays	Journal entries/freewrites
Type of posttest measure?	Journal entry written at home	Posttest	Essay written in class	10-min freewrite in class
Who provided error feedback?	Researcher	Four classroom instructors	Two classroom instructors	One instructor, spot-checked by researcher
What type of error feedback was provided?	Not specified	Direct versus indirect	Direct and three different types of indirect	Direct and indirect
Were error types or categories specified?	No	Yes	No	No
Was revision after correction required?	No	Yes (experimental group only)	Yes	Yes (one group only)
Major finding	Error correction group made 15% fewer errors than other group; progress over time not measured	Indirect feedback group made more progress in accuracy over time	All groups improved over time; no major differences across treatment types	No significant differences in accuracy across treatment groups; progress over time not measured

received “message related” comments only; (2) Lalande found that both treatment groups (direct versus indirect feedback) improved in accuracy over time but that the gains of the “indirect” group were greater; (3) Robb et al. found that all four groups (receiving four different types of correction) improved in accuracy over time but that the differences between groups were not statistically significant; and (4) Semke found no significant differences in accuracy across four treatment groups on a posttest measure but did not report on improvement over time (though reference is made to a pretest/posttest design, the pretest data are not provided). Thus, returning to my earlier point, we cannot say that this group of studies either reports “similar findings” or constitutes “replications of research in different contexts.”

Observation 3: Existing research predicts positive effects for written error correction. Recent second language acquisition (SLA) research on Focus on Form (in both written and spoken language) strongly suggests that adult second language acquirers in particular need their errors made salient and explicit to them so that they can avoid fossilization and continue developing linguistic competence (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1998; James, 1998; Lightbown, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Tomasello & Herron, 1989). In studies of error correction in second language writing, there is positive evidence to be found on this question in three lines of research: (1) studies which compare the accuracy of texts of students who received error correction with the texts of students who did not (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Kepner, 1991); (2) studies which measure the progress of students in linguistic accuracy over time (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1995b, 1997; Ferris, Chaney, Komura, McKee, & Roberts, 2000; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982; Robb et al., 1986); and (3) studies of student views on error feedback (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Leki, 1991).

Critics of error correction research have dismissed the first line of (quasi-experimental) research because it is not longitudinal, saying that the fact that students could successfully edit their texts in the short-term does not demonstrate that any such progress would stand up over time. In fact, it has been said that such evidence “tells us nothing” (anonymous *JSLW* review). However, it can be argued that the cognitive investment of editing one’s text after receiving error feedback is likely a necessary, or at least helpful, step on the road to longer term improvement in accuracy. Again, SLA research is instructive here. Many researchers examining the effects of both grammar instruction and error feedback (e.g., in the form of recasts, which are an oral correlate of written error correction) report on both immediate, post-treatment student performance as well as delayed effects (i.e., retesting the subjects a month or two after the treatment). It is assumed that *both* measures are important—the former because it helps to assess student uptake of corrections received and the latter because it provides evidence as to whether the input has been not only comprehended on the spot but acquired as part of the learners’ developing competence in the L2. Though the longitudinal piece, the assessment of the delayed effects of the feedback, is lacking in many studies of error feedback in L2 writing, this does not mean that examination of students’ ability to edit from one draft to the next after receiving feedback is useless or irrelevant, but merely that our designs to date have mostly been incomplete.

The same critics similarly dismiss the second line of (longitudinal) research because typically no control group (receiving no error correction) is included, saying that measured improvements in accuracy over time could result from other factors besides error correction.

Empirically speaking, this is a legitimate concern and certainly exposes a major gap in the research base. However, at minimum it can be said that if the existing longitudinal studies do not reliably demonstrate the *efficacy* of error feedback, they certainly do not prove its *uselessness*, either.³ Thus, strong claims either for or against the helpfulness of written error correction over time are, as I have written previously, premature. However, in the absence of compelling evidence in either direction, predictions from the existing evidence can arguably justify the continued investigation of the issue and the continued use of error feedback in the classroom while we pursue these questions empirically.

As to the third line of research, student views on error correction, I have noted elsewhere (including in my 1999 response to Truscott) that studies of student opinions about error feedback are very consistent in reporting that L2 student writers value error feedback from their teachers and consider it extremely important to their success.⁴ As Truscott correctly notes (1996, 1999), this finding does not in and of itself argue for the continuation of error correction by L2 writing teachers. Students are not, after all, always the best judges of what they need most. However, from an affective standpoint, students' strongly held opinions about this issue may influence their success or lack thereof in the L2 writing class. Thus, the existing research on student views predicts that the presence of error feedback may be beneficial and its absence may be harmful.

So, to summarize the answers to the question of "Where are we?":

- (1) Because of the lack of studies that are both controlled and longitudinal, the evidence on the question of "Does error feedback help?" is scarce (and some would argue nonexistent). If anything, the published debate between Truscott and me may have misled some into thinking that we are a lot further along in our investigation of this issue than we in fact are. The truth is that we have barely gotten started.
- (2) Though there have been a number of studies on this topic over the past two decades, researchers have essentially been operating in a vacuum: There have been no attempts to investigate questions surrounding error correction in L2 writing in a sustained, systematic, replicable manner that would allow for comparisons across either similar or different contexts and student populations. Many of the studies have been extremely haphazard in their design and/or their reporting. We need to start virtually from scratch and be a lot more careful in the future.⁵
- (3) Though we are far from arriving at any *conclusions* about error correction in L2 writing classes, the previous research base does allow us to articulate some

³A reader of an earlier version of this manuscript asked, "How does one prove that error correction does not work? This claim is not falsifiable." This is a good question, but my point here is that Truscott (1996, 1999) makes a strong claim that the *existing research base* demonstrates conclusively that error correction is ineffective and should therefore be abolished. While I would take a stronger stance in the opposite direction—that the existing evidence points to its helpfulness—at minimum it seems fair to say that the question has not been answered satisfactorily to date.

⁴This body of work includes both published studies and M.A. theses; it also includes general studies of student reactions to teacher feedback as well as specific studies on student views of error correction. For examples, see Cohen (1987), Ferris (1995a), Ferris and Roberts (2001), Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994, 1996), Leki (1991), and Saito (1994). See Ferris (2003, Chap. 5) for a complete listing and discussion of these studies.

⁵I mean no criticism of and certainly no disrespect toward previous researchers (who of course include myself) by this statement.

predictions that can be useful in designing future research. These predictions, drawn from SLA research, L2 writing research, and student survey research, include the following:

- Adult acquirers may fossilize and not continue to make progress in accuracy of linguistic forms without explicit instruction and feedback on their errors.
- Students who receive feedback on their written errors will be more likely to self-correct them during revision than those who receive no feedback—and this demonstrated uptake may be a necessary step in developing longer term linguistic competence.
- Students are likely to attend to and appreciate feedback on their errors, and this may motivate them both to make corrections and to work harder on improving their writing. The lack of such feedback may lead to anxiety or resentment, which could decrease motivation and lower confidence in their teachers.

So, where are we? In terms of carefully designed research that gets directly at the most pressing questions, we are virtually at Square One. But as to positive indicators that error feedback may not only be helpful but necessary, from the vantage point of acquisition and affective variables, we have learned some things that justify the use of error correction in the meantime (for teachers and students who are favorably disposed towards it) and certainly that underscore the urgency of more and better research on this topic.

Where do we go from here?

We need controlled longitudinal studies on “the big question”—whether or not error feedback helps students to improve in written accuracy over time. It is worth noting that researchers interested in this question find themselves in something of a methodological “Catch-22”: If an experimental study with a control group is done (e.g., [Fathman & Whalley, 1990](#); [Ferris & Roberts, 2001](#)), it is criticized for not being longitudinal. (“Sure, students edit more accurately from one draft to the next of the same paper, but how do we know correction has any effect over time?”) However, when a longitudinal study is done, it is critiqued for not being controlled enough. (“Other factors besides correction could have caused students’ improvement in accuracy.”)

Despite these methodological dilemmas and the ethical ones (using students as guinea pigs for research that could harm them) referred to previously, it is imperative for the advancement of our knowledge about this issue that the absence of comparative longitudinal studies on the helpfulness of error correction in L2 student writing be somehow addressed. Researchers need to think creatively about ways to approach this question. For example, two intact classes taught by the same instructor could be compared over a term. In one class, the teacher could simply provide summary end notes about students’ grammar problems but no in-text corrections, while in the other, texts could be marked at the point of error. Students in the “control” (end note) group would still be receiving feedback of a sort (addressing the ethical dilemma), but a clear comparison could be made between feedback and no point-of-error feedback. Another alternative approach would be finely tuned case studies which follow the progress of student volunteers receiving different treatments.

Table 3
A framework for analyzing and designing error correction studies

Part I: Basic parameters

Subject (students and teachers) characteristics: SL/FL, language majors or non-majors,
L2 proficiency, background in writing (process vs. product), formal grammar knowledge
Sample size (including the size of treatment groups into which subjects were divided)
Duration of instructional treatment and/or data collection

Part II: Instructional procedures

Type of writing considered (e.g., freewrites or journal entries vs. multiple-draft compositions; in-class vs. out-of-class)
Larger instructional context: Were students given grammar instruction or resources for processing error feedback? Did they track their progress, and were they given increasing responsibility for self-editing?
The nature of error feedback: Who provided it? What linguistic issues were addressed? What mechanisms (direct/indirect feedback, codes, etc.) were used for giving feedback?

Part III: Research design

Was an appropriate quantitative design employed (control group, pretest/posttest, accurate statistics, confounding variables accounted for)?
Were multiple raters or coders used, were interrater reliabilities calculated and reported, and was it clear to what those reliability coefficients referred?

Adapted from Brown (1991), Ferris (1999), Ferris and Hedgcock (1998), and Polio (1997). Source: Ferris (2003, Fig. 3.1, p. 45).

We need studies that are comparable in design and that are reported clearly enough to be replicable. Specifically, what is needed, going forward, are studies that carefully (a) report on learner and contextual characteristics; (b) define operationally which errors are being examined (and what is meant by “error” to begin with); (c) provide consistent treatments or feedback schemes; and (d) explain how such errors (and revisions or edits) were counted and analyzed systematically. Then these studies should be replicated across a range of contexts and learner types. Table 3 outlines the various parameters that should be considered in designing error correction studies in the future; see also Ferris (2003, Chap. 3) for a more detailed discussion of these parameters and a detailed critical analysis of the existing research base across these variables.

We also need finely tuned studies on specific issues surrounding the treatment of error. The discussion in this paper has to this point focused on one big question: Does error feedback help, yes or no? But, as I have argued elsewhere (Ferris, 2002), teachers’ error correction is only one piece (albeit a large and time-consuming piece) of an overall approach to the “treatment of error” in L2 student writing. In assessing whether or not error correction or error treatment “works,” we should also consider and investigate a number of related questions:

- (1) Is there a difference in student progress in accuracy if students are allowed or required to revise their papers after receiving feedback?
- (2) Does supplemental grammar instruction (especially if it is tied to the concerns or error categories addressed in teacher feedback) affect student progress?
- (3) Does charting of written errors help students to engage cognitively in error analysis and facilitate long-term improvement?

Table 4
 Questions to consider in researching error feedback

Research question	Summary of previous findings
Part A: Error correction options	
Do direct and indirect feedback have different effects on accuracy?	Yes: Lalande (1982), Frantzen (1995), Ferris et al. (2000), Ferris and Helt (2000) No: Semke (1984), Robb et al. (1986)
Do students respond better to feedback on certain types or categories of error?	Yes: Chaney (1999), Ferris (1995a), Ferris et al. (2000), Ferris and Helt (2000), Frantzen (1995), Frantzen and Rissel (1987), Lalande (1982), Sheppard (1992) No: Chastain (1990)
Is there a difference in outcome depending upon whether indirect feedback is coded or uncoded?	Yes: Sheppard (1992) Maybe: Ferris et al. (2000), Ferris & Roberts (2001) No: Robb et al. (1986)
Part B: Supplementing error feedback	
Does revision after correction help student accuracy?	No: Polio et al. (1998), Frantzen (1995) Maybe/unclear: Cohen and Robbins (1976), Semke (1984), Sheppard (1992)
Does maintenance of error logs lead to improvement in accuracy over time?	Yes: Lalande (1982), Ferris (1995a), Ferris and Helt (2000), Unclear: Roberts (1999)
Does supplemental grammar instruction (along with error correction) make a difference in student accuracy?	Yes: Lalande (1982), Frantzen and Rissel (1987), Ferris (1995a) No: Frantzen (1995), Polio et al. (1998)

Adapted from Ferris (2003, Figs. 3.3, p. 64; Fig. 7.1, p. 142).

- (4) Are certain types of errors (lexical, morphological, syntactic) more amenable to treatment than others?
- (5) Does the relative explicitness of teacher feedback (direct, indirect, location, labelling, etc.) have an impact on student uptake and long-term progress?

Though there is some preliminary evidence on these questions (see Table 4), none of them has to date been examined adequately or systematically enough.

Conclusion: What do we do in the meantime?

Like many others, I wear the hats of both researcher/reviewer and classroom instructor (both of ESL writing students and future L2 writing teachers), and when I am wearing the “teacher” hat, I am sometimes irritated when reviewers do what I have done thus far in this paper—critique most or all of the previous research and essentially argue that we need to start from scratch. Obviously, it could be years, even decades, before we have trustworthy empirical answers to some of the questions we need to consider—so what *do* we (teachers and teacher educators) do in the meantime?

When the research base is inadequate—as it is in in most areas of applied linguistics/ TESOL/L2 composition—we clearly cannot afford to stop teaching and wait for the researchers to tell us how it should be done. So we must, in the meantime, rely on the

Table 5

Treatment of error in second language student writing: major issues

Teacher preparation

Grammar for ESL teaching

Practice in identifying written error and giving feedback

Practice in developing and presenting mini-lessons on grammar and editing strategies

Error treatment

Teacher feedback that is sensitive to student needs and instructional context

Consciousness-raising about importance of accuracy and editing strategies

Strategy training

Mini-lessons

Practice and accountability

See also Ferris (2002).

research evidence that does exist, our own experience and intuitions, and the desires of our students to inform and guide us, but at the same time remain humble and avoid rigidity, knowing that, as a research and teaching community, we are still shaping the knowledge and discourse of our discipline. With these parameters and caveats in mind, I offer my own “best guesses” as to the ways to approach error treatment in L2 writing classes (see Table 5).

First, teachers must prepare themselves to effectively treat students’ written errors. This preparation may need to include taking classes or obtaining a library on grammar issues especially relevant to L2 writers. It should also include practice in identifying and responding to errors in students’ texts. Finally, it should include the opportunity to develop and teach narrowly focused mini-lessons on salient grammar points and on editing strategies.

Second, once teachers themselves are prepared, the effective treatment of students’ written error must include a variety of carefully integrated components. The most obvious—and the most controversial—is teacher-provided error feedback. Providing error feedback that will help students and not distract or discourage them involves some careful decision-making on the part of the teacher which considers the students’ needs and backgrounds and the instructional context. There is a variety of options for error feedback—from direct correction of error to some fairly indirect and less informative approaches—from which the teacher must choose, again bearing in mind the needs of the students and goals of the writing course and task.

Third, error feedback is not the only approach to the treatment of errors. Students may need some consciousness-raising, public relations, or whatever you might call it, about why linguistic accuracy and editing skills are important. They may need some grammar instruction, and they will undoubtedly need some strategy training. And they need practice, accountability, and the opportunity to engage cognitively in editing as a problem-solving process.

To summarize, these three generalizations about the treatment of error lead to six practical suggestions:

- (1) Error treatment, including error feedback by teachers, is a necessary component of L2 writing instruction. We must prepare ourselves to do it competently, we must plan for it carefully in designing our courses, and we must execute it faithfully and consistently.

- (2) In the majority of instances, teachers should provide *indirect* feedback that engages students in cognitive problem-solving as they attempt to self-edit based upon the feedback that they have received. (Exceptions may include students at lower levels of L2 proficiency, who may not possess the linguistic competence to self-correct.)
- (3) Different types of errors will likely require varying treatments. Students may be less capable, for instance, of self-editing some lexical errors and complex, global problems with sentence structure than more discrete morphological errors.
- (4) Students should be required to revise (or at least self-edit) their texts after receiving feedback, ideally in class where they can consult with their peers and instructor.
- (5) Supplemental grammar instruction (in class or through individualized self-study materials recommended by the instructor) can facilitate progress in accuracy if it is driven by student needs and integrated with other aspects of error treatment (teacher feedback, charting, etc.).
- (6) The maintenance of error charts, ideally by the students themselves with guidance from the instructor, can heighten student awareness of their weaknesses and of their improvement.

Though I hate to be clichéd, to be faithful and accurate, I must end this paper on error correction for L2 writers in the way that nearly all research papers end: Further research is necessary. Though it may be difficult for the ethical and methodological reasons I have already described, we need to think of ways to carry out longitudinal, carefully designed, replicable studies that compare the writing of students receiving error feedback with that of students who receive none, as well as comparing and controlling for other aspects of error treatment. As already noted, there is positive evidence from various lines of research—SLA studies, short-term experimental studies of error correction in L2 writing, longitudinal studies of improvement, and reactions and views of students themselves—lending support to the argument that we cannot dismiss error correction’s potential out-of-hand. But in the end I must agree with Truscott that this evidence will only be suggestive, not conclusive, unless a more systematic research program of longitudinal designs that include no-feedback control groups is conducted. So for those of us deeply interested in this important pedagogical issue—let’s keep looking!

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Dana Ferris is Professor of English and ESL Coordinator at California State University, Sacramento. Her publications include *Teaching ESL Composition: Purpose, Process, & Practice* (with John Hedgcock, Erlbaum, 1998/2004), *Treatment of Error in L2 Writing Classes* (Michigan, 2002), and *Response to Student Writing: Implications for Second Language Students* (Erlbaum, 2003), as well as a number of journal articles and book chapters on response to student writing and teacher error correction.