

The Case for “The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes”: A Response to Ferris

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Ferris (1999) rejects my case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes (Truscott, 1996) and attempts to build her own case *for* the practice. This paper responds to her criticisms. I argue that these criticisms are both unfounded and highly selective, leaving large portions of my case unchallenged and, in some cases, even strengthening them. If the case for correction has any appeal, it rests on a strong bias—that critics must prove beyond any doubt that correction is never a good idea, while supporters need only show that uncertainty remains.

My decision to write “The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes” (Truscott, 1996) was based on two considerations. One, of course, was my conviction that grammar correction is a bad idea. The second factor, no less important than the first, was the state of the field. Then, as now, grammar correction was the norm. Then, as now, the reasons for changing the norm were out there. But these reasons were largely disregarded.

The literature was full of confident assertions—and assumptions—that grammar correction is beneficial and that it must be a part of second-language writing classes. Dissenting voices were almost non-existent. For teaching purposes, the result was an effective lack of choice. It was simply taken for granted that language teachers correct grammar errors.

There is, in my opinion, no situation more undesirable than this for the teaching profession: when one questionable view becomes so dominant that most teachers can scarcely conceive of an alternative, let alone seriously consider it as an option for their own teaching. In this situation, the best contribution a reviewer can make is to present a credible alternative view, and to present it forcefully enough that it will have some hope of being seriously considered in spite of the powerful biases it will encounter. My paper was thus an effort to tell teachers (and others) that there is an alternative to be considered, an alternative that, based

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on everything now known about the subject, is preferable to the existing orthodoxy.

Ferris (1999) strongly objects. She welcomes critical discussion of correction, but asserts that no one should argue for its abandonment. She even goes so far as to say that, because I did so, my paper poses a danger to students (p. 9). This claim turns the logic of the situation on its head—the real problem is the almost complete dominance of the orthodox view, not the existence of a dissenting voice.

The thinking behind this logical reversal is the topic of a later section of this paper. I first examine—and reject—Ferris's specific criticisms of my case against grammar correction. For this part of the paper (the first three sections), I largely follow her organization (skipping parts that do not contain any challenge to my case), so that readers can make a point-by-point comparison between the case for grammar correction and the case against it. I then give a summary of the evidence and arguments, before turning to the powerful bias to which the case for correction owes much, if not all, of its continuing appeal. I then briefly consider the future prospects for correction and conclude by returning to the issue of choice in language teaching.

ALLEGED PROBLEMS OF "DEFINITION"

In the section of her response entitled "Disagreements with Truscott's Arguments," Ferris (1999) presents two types of criticisms, identifying the first type as problems of definition. She begins by pointing out that I did not define "error correction," describing this as a "critical lack" (p. 3). I disagree. Since I never used this term in my paper, the lack of definition is not particularly critical.

She then turns to the term I did use, *grammar correction*. But it is not clear to me that her subsequent criticism involves a problem of definition. It is directed against my substantive claim that my thesis (grammar correction should be abandoned) is valid for all forms of grammar correction, not just for those that everyone rejects.

She goes on to argue against this claim, pointing out that some correction is done poorly and arguing that ineffective correction must be distinguished from the more sensible versions. Therefore, the argument goes, one cannot make an evaluation of grammar correction in general. It is certainly true that some varieties of correction have more problems than others. Being clear, for example, is inherently better than being misleading, so in this sense clear correction is better than misleading correction. But the strong claim that students benefit from correction when it is clear, consistent, intelligent (and whatever else one wishes to add) is another matter. It is this strong claim that bears on my thesis, not the uncontroversial point that some correction is poorly done.

Ferris (1999) states there is "mounting research evidence" for the claim that students benefit from well-done grammatical corrections (p. 4). This is a crucial point, one that requires clear and thorough development. Readers need to know

what specific research it refers to, what exactly was done in this research, what sorts of results were obtained, and what—in Ferris’s judgment—constitutes meaningful evidence. But none of this information is provided.

Moreover, the rest of the paper indicates that alleged evidence supporting correction actually plays little or no role in the case for correction. At one point, such evidence is described as “scant” (p. 5). Another part of the paper (p. 7) implies that research goes against the intuition that correction is effective. At two points in the conclusion (pp. 9, 10), Ferris criticizes me for drawing a strong conclusion from inadequate or inconclusive evidence, but does not suggest that any of the evidence is inconsistent with my conclusion. Apart from the original “mounting research evidence” statement, I can find only one point at which she says, or even hints, that correction is supported by research evidence. This is the undeveloped claim that Fathman and Whalley (1990) and Lalande (1982) provide support (see discussion below).

It seems reasonably safe, then, to conclude that the claim of evidence for good correction is not a meaningful part of the case for grammar correction. But the meaning of the claim remains unclear, especially the question of what, in Ferris’s judgment, constitutes evidence. The claim is accompanied by a list of five sources, in which can be found “reviews and specific suggestions” related to it (p. 4). These might be expected to provide some clarification. I have searched through three of these sources—Ferris (1995), Ellis (1998), and Bates et al. (1993)—and found nothing that constitutes meaningful evidence. But they may help to clarify the issue of what counts as evidence.

Ferris (1995) did not refer to any published sources that claimed to provide evidence for correction. Ellis (1998) cited only one study that bears any resemblance to Ferris’s description—Doughty and Varela (1998).¹ This work mixed oral and written correction, with a strong emphasis on the former. So it could not, even in principle, support claims about the effectiveness of correction in writing classes. Moreover, the authors acknowledged that their results were weak for the written side. It was only for students’ speaking ability that they made any strong claims of success. For a response to these claims, see Truscott (1999).

In the book by Bates et al. (1993), I would guess that the relevant references are Cardelle and Corno (1981), Fathman and Whalley (1990), and Lalande (1982). I argued previously that none of these constitutes evidence for correction (Truscott, 1996, pp. 339–340). For the latter two sources, see also the discussion below. Ferris does not offer any response to my arguments.

ALLEGED PROBLEMS IN MY REVIEWS OF STUDIES ON CORRECTION

The second part of Ferris’s “Disagreements with Truscott’s Arguments” section questions my review of studies on the effectiveness of correction. The main

points are (a) there is substantial variation in conditions among the studies I cited, so no generalizations can be made from those studies; (b) I exaggerated the significance of studies supporting my thesis; and (c) I illicitly dismissed contrary evidence.

The Issue of Variability

As Ferris (1999) notes, the studies I cited as evidence against correction differed in the types of subjects they used, as well as in their instructional methods and their research designs. Because of these differences, she argues, one cannot make any generalizations from this work.

I would argue for the opposite view: That generalization is most reasonable when similar results are obtained under a variety of conditions (as they are in this case) and least reasonable when the conditions are similar for all the studies. When consistent results are obtained under consistent conditions, one can reasonably argue that these specific conditions are responsible for these results. But when similar results appear in widely differing circumstances, no such explanation is available; the phenomenon is a general one. I cannot understand an argument that asserts the opposite; in particular, the argument that variable conditions among the correction studies preclude any meaningful generalizations from their findings.

Another problem with that argument is that it includes three studies that I said were *not* evidence: Cardelle & Corno (1981); Fathman & Whalley (1990); and Lalonde (1982) (Truscott, 1996, pp. 339–340). (For the latter two sources, see also the discussion below.) What the argument actually says, then, is that there is great variability within a set of studies that includes (some of?) the ones I used and some that I did not use, so no generalizations can be made from the ones I used. There is also some confusion about the length of the various studies. I did not use any that “consisted of a ‘one-shot’ experimental treatment” (Ferris, 1999, p. 5), nor did one-semester studies represent the upper extreme—some of them were considerably longer (Robb et al., 1986; Dvorak, as described by VanPatten, 1986, 1988).

Evidence Against Correction

Ferris (1999) also accuses me of overstating the evidence that correction is ineffective. She supports this claim by looking at only one of the sources I cited—Kepner (1991). So even if one accepts her description of the way I used this study (I do not), only the most sympathetic of readers would consider this adequate support for the accusation.

Interestingly, the claim that I overstated the significance of this study is based entirely on the fact that it did not involve revision, a point that I explicitly noted (Truscott, 1996, p. 335). Moreover, journal writing (the target of the corrections)

is a standard part of writing classes, as is correction of the type used by Kepner (1991). So the study is certainly important for the question of whether grammar correction has a place in writing classes.

This point goes back to the more general issue of variation in the work I cited. Any one study is quite limited in its implications. But when a general pattern emerges from a number of different studies (a pattern of failure, in this case), that pattern must be taken seriously. Kepner's (1991) work is simply one part of the pattern.

Non-Evidence for Correction

The other objection to my treatment of the empirical evidence is that I "dismiss[ed] out of hand" the work that contradicted my thesis (Ferris, 1999, p. 5). The cases cited are Fathman and Whalley (1990) and Lalande (1982). Ferris does not address the reasons I gave for dismissing these two studies (Truscott, 1996, pp. 339–340), but simply asserts that my conclusions are wrong. The only response I can make to this claim is to summarize the points and leave it to readers to judge the validity of my conclusions.

The problem with pro-correction interpretations of Fathman and Whalley (1990) is that the study did not address the question of whether correction makes students better writers. It showed, instead, that the revision process is more successful when teachers participate in it than when students work without assistance. My argument is, simply, that one cannot infer from this finding that the assisted students will write more accurately in the future when they do not have specific comments from a teacher to guide them.

In my discussion of Lalande (1982), I was actually quite conservative. As anyone who reads this study can verify, the popular claim that it found positive effects is simply false. Each of the two groups in the experiment received extensive grammar correction and rewrote their compositions on the basis of that feedback. Over the course of the study, one of these groups showed no significant changes (not even remotely significant) in accuracy and the other had significant declines in accuracy.

Lalande's (1982) claim that one group benefited from correction rested on his assertion that, without it, the scores of both groups would have gone down because the grammatical complexity of the students' writing appeared to increase. But there is no reason to accept this assertion, and there is some basis to believe the opposite, that being, without correction, the scores would have gone up as a result of the additional language experience students obtained during the course of the study. Such effects are known to occur (Sheppard, 1992). The sort of hypothetical considerations Lalande relied on point more toward harmful effects than toward benefits.

Setting aside the hypothetical claims and looking simply at the known facts—that neither group improved on Lalande's (1982) measures and that one experi-

enced a decline—it would be reasonable, again, to treat these results as evidence that correction is either ineffective or harmful. So my conclusion—that they are not evidence *for* correction—was quite cautious and conservative.

FERRIS'S REASONS FOR CONTINUING TO CORRECT

Ferris (1999) gives three reasons for continuing the practice of grammar correction. I will consider each of them in turn.

Students' Attitudes

The first reason that Ferris (1999) proposes for continuing to correct is that students believe in correction and want to receive it, so teachers should give it to them. I believe I have already provided an adequate response to this familiar argument (Truscott, 1996, pp. 359–360). I will not repeat my earlier comments here, but rather expand on them.

The issue of teachers' influence on students' beliefs is especially worthy of further discussion. How much of students' false faith in correction is due to the reinforcement it receives from their teachers? To some extent, the argument from students' beliefs is circular: By using correction, teachers encourage students to believe in it; because students believe in it, teachers must continue using it. It would be interesting to see how many teachers have seriously tried correction-free instruction and, especially, how many of those who use this argument have done so. If they do, they might well find that their students are not nearly so set in their ways as many authors would have us believe.

My own experience is with students who come to my classes firmly convinced that grammar correction is an essential part of language learning, in no small part because their teachers have been giving them that message for as long as they can remember. But my correction-free approach neither produces student rebellions nor leads to signs of frustration or lack of motivation or confidence in learners. By all indications, including end-of-semester evaluations, these students are quite happy with the course, considerably happier, in my judgment, than were students in past years when I did correct. I know of no reason to think the situation would be different for other teachers who choose to try correction-free teaching.

The Attitudes of Content Course Instructors

Ferris's (1999) second argument for continuing grammar correction is that several inconclusive and uncited studies found that some university instructors who teach content courses are relatively unhappy about the grammar errors of nonnative students. Apart from the overt weakness of the claim, the problem with

this argument is that it simply assumes that correction will reduce these errors. I have argued at great length that this assumption is unjustified.

Self-Editing

The third argument offered by Ferris (1999) involves the development of self-editing ability. I have already provided a detailed response to the idea that correction is helpful for self-editing (Truscott, 1996, pp. 347–349). The exact relation between my comments and this argument is difficult to judge, partly because Ferris does not address these comments and partly because I have a hard time deciding what exactly the claim is.

The self-editing argument combines grammar correction and strategy training, making no distinction between them, so the role that is being claimed for correction is left unclear. Correction (plus strategy training?) allegedly provides students with the knowledge necessary for self-editing, but it is not clear what sort of knowledge is being referred to or why it would develop if and only if students receive grammar correction. This argument appears to beg the question of whether correction is effective. An additional problem is that the argument seems to refer not to grammar correction as a general practice, but only to one specific variety that is used for one definite purpose, possibly for specific types of students at a given point in the learning process.

This argument is difficult to interpret, so I cannot be sure that I have responded adequately. But it does not appear to contain anything about grammar correction that I have not already discussed.

THE STATE OF THE CASE AGAINST GRAMMAR CORRECTION

Unchallenged Portions of the Argument

For large portions of the case against grammar correction, Ferris (1999) either accepts my points or declines to challenge them. First, she agrees that correction is unpleasant for teachers and, similarly, offers no challenge to my argument that it has harmful effects on students' attitudes. Her only comment is the suggestion that teachers should make students even more aware of the importance of avoiding or eliminating mistakes.

Ferris does not challenge my argument that correction leads students to shorten and simplify their writing to avoid being corrected, thereby reducing their opportunities to practice writing and to experiment with new forms. In fact, the suggestion that teachers should make students more aware of the importance of avoiding mistakes, if carried out, is likely to exacerbate the problem.

Ferris accepts the point that correction absorbs enormous amounts of teachers' time and energy. In fact, she strengthens it considerably by stating that teachers must acquire a thorough knowledge of linguistics and of methods for teaching

grammar and must obtain extensive practice in applying this knowledge. She also points out the time and energy required in teacher-training programs to help teachers learn to correct more effectively and agrees that different types of errors require different forms of correction, with the implication that teachers need to spend even more time mastering the practice.

Ferris states that effective correction requires teachers to keep track of their students' most serious and most frequent errors (apparently for each individual student) and correct those errors specifically. The time and energy required for this work is clear, especially for those teachers who must deal with large numbers of students. Finally, she leaves unchallenged the claim that students who would benefit from grammar correction must also spend a great amount of time and energy on it and that this devotion will detract from other aspects of their learning. Thus, the part of my argument about the harmful effects of grammar correction is almost entirely unchallenged. In fact, it is stronger after Ferris's discussion than it was before.

She also accepts or declines to challenge large portions of the argument that correction is ineffective. There is no discussion of my general theoretical point that effective correction would have to be based on an understanding of complex learning processes, rather than relying on simplistic ideas of transferring information from teacher to learner, as it currently does. Nor is there any attempt to deal with the problems created by developmental sequences or with the issue of pseudolearning. For the practical problems with grammar correction that I discussed in my paper, she seems to accept my view of the many problems faced by students, stating only that teachers must somehow recognize and deal with them.

These largely uncontested portions of my argument make up a significant part of the case against grammar correction. Even if everything else I said were false, these points by themselves would make a strong case for my thesis. Thus, even without examining the criticisms Ferris *does* make, I can conclude that the case against grammar correction remains valid.

Failed Challenges to the Argument

Above, I responded to each of Ferris's criticisms of my case. Here, I briefly summarize the points. The first criticism is that there is research evidence for the effectiveness of correction, contrary to my conclusions. But no meaningful support is provided for this claim, and later discussion appears to contradict it at several points. Another criticism is that the evidence I reviewed cannot support any generalizations because of the variability among the studies. But this objection is based on an argument that mixes relevant and irrelevant work, includes wrong details about the studies I used and, as I have argued, misrepresents the logic of generalization. A third criticism is that I overstated the evidence against correction. But only one unconvincing example is offered in support of this strong and general accusation. The final objection to my case against correction is that I il-

licitly dismissed evidence against my thesis. But this claim is left entirely unsubstantiated, and the supporting arguments I did provide in my paper are not addressed by Ferris.

Another point of contention concerns the three reasons Ferris (1999) gives for continuing the practice of correction. The first simply repeats an old argument, that students believe in and want correction, without addressing the response I already made to that argument. The second reason rests on the unjustified assumption that correction is effective. The third claim, about the relationship between correction and self-editing, also ignores the comments I have already made on the subject, is difficult to interpret, probably depends on the assumption that correction is effective and, even if valid, seems to be relevant only to one specialized use of correction.

THE BURDEN OF PROOF BIAS

So what is left of the case *for* grammar correction in L2 writing classes? Little more than the lingering pro-correction bias. But this bias remains powerful. It usually expresses itself in an extremely strong and usually implicit assumption about the burden of proof in the correction debate. On this assumption, the case for correction and the case against it do not enter the debate on an equal footing—far from it. Instead, those who reject correction are expected to produce an absolutely conclusive case that it is always a bad idea, while those who support correction need only raise doubts about the case against it. Until these doubts have been eliminated, teachers should continue using the technique, and using it very generally.

This assumption is rarely made explicit, so discussion of it is difficult. But it forms the implicit core of many pro-correction arguments and no doubt makes a very large contribution to the common beliefs that teachers *must* correct grammar errors and that there is no serious alternative to this method. This assumption, therefore, must be brought out into the open, where it can be examined rather than simply assumed. Ferris's response provides a good opportunity.

Explicit Burden of Proof Bias in Ferris's Arguments

In the section on reasons for continuing grammar correction, Ferris (1999) makes the assumption about the burden of proof for this technique explicit and offers a defense for it. She states that the three reasons offered in her paper are grounds for continuing correction “until such time as it has been conclusively proven to be ineffective and/or harmful” (p. 8). I have already responded to these three reasons above. Moreover, the harmful effects of the practice provide a strong case for the opposite position—that correction should be avoided until a convincing case can be made for its use.

Elsewhere in her paper, Ferris hints at another possible defense, stating that the evidence is inconclusive, so I should not have suggested the elimination of a practice that students want and teachers strive to perfect (p. 9). I have already dealt with the argument from the perspective of students' attitudes about correction. The fact that teachers work diligently on correction technique does not put the burden of proof on the anti-correction side, as this argument suggests. It would make far more sense to see this great expense of time and energy as a reason for abandoning the practice until such time as research has conclusively shown that this expense is justified.

Another apparent defense of the bias comes from the existence of pro-correction intuitions (Ferris, 1999, pp. 7, 10). I have already responded to this idea (Truscott, 1996, pp. 341–342, 357 and, to some extent, the entire section, pp. 341–354), pointing out problems with these intuitions and suggesting a number of reasons why people commonly possess these false intuitions.

Implicit Burden of Proof Bias in Ferris's Arguments

The power of the bias is shown by its appearance in other parts of Ferris's paper, in which its presence is not acknowledged. One of the specific points of the conclusion, for example, is that issues as important as the use of correction should not be ruled on hastily. The problem with this admonition is that it is directed specifically against decisions *not* to correct grammar errors. A decision to correct is apparently not hasty, nor is a decision to adopt a specific method of correction. The same idea is expressed in Ferris's summary statement: My recommendation to abandon correction is premature. However, according to this view, recommendations to correct grammar errors, or even to do so in a very specific manner, apparently are not premature. Similarly, my argument that correction should be abandoned is described as a "rush, or stampede, to judgment" (p. 9), but this criticism is not applied to arguments in favor of correction, no matter how judgmental they are.

The bulk of the conclusion is, in fact, an extended presentation of this bias. The gist of the "plea for restraint" (pp. 8–10) is that no one should make any strong statements *against* correction. Most people who write on this subject, including Ferris, assert that correction is effective and that teachers should provide it. But these strong pro-correction statements do not draw any calls for restraint.

It is not clear just what the thinking is in these cases. It would seem to be something stronger and more fundamental than the defenses I considered above. In any case, rational evaluation of arguments for and against grammar correction requires that proponents of correction either provide an explicit, coherent defense of the bias or abandon it. The latter means acknowledging that the existence of uncertainty does not imply that teachers should correct grammatical errors—arguments against correction must be evaluated on an equal footing with those for the practice.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE?

Ferris is certainly right that many interesting questions remain open. It would plainly be absurd to claim that research has proven correction can never be beneficial under any circumstances, a position I have never taken, despite Ferris's implicit claim that I have (Ferris, 1999, p. 5). But nor can one reasonably infer that the practice should be maintained, in spite of the many good reasons for abandoning it, simply because one can imagine future research finding it beneficial under some as yet unknown circumstances.

A more reasonable move is to acknowledge that grammar correction is, in general, a bad idea and then to see if specific cases can be found in which it might not be a totally misguided practice. If and when such cases are identified, correction might become an appropriate, if strictly limited, tool. It should be remembered, though, that the presence of beneficial effects is not, in itself, sufficient justification for correction. It must also be shown that these benefits are substantial enough to justify the problems that accompany the practice or that these problems can be adequately managed.

I support the sort of research program Ferris outlines in her conclusion. I may even participate in it. But the logic of such a program needs to be clarified. The goal is not to determine whether an adequate case can be made for abandoning grammar correction—that has already been done. Its purpose should be to search for those special, hypothetical circumstances under which correction might not be a bad idea.

CONCLUSION: THE ISSUE OF CHOICE

Teachers must constantly make decisions about what to do—and what not to do—in their classes. These decisions are necessarily made under conditions of uncertainty; research never puts an end to doubt. But the choices still must be made, and made constantly. So, given the world as it is, the best we can hope for is that teachers will look seriously at the case against grammar correction, compare it to the case for correction, decide which is stronger, and then incorporate that decision in their teaching.

I consider this point straightforward. I am not sure how Ferris (1999) feels about it, especially in view of her disturbing statement (p. 9) that my paper is dangerous because people in the language-teaching profession might accept its conclusions without any critical evaluation. In any case, the issue of choice is central in the debate over grammar correction. The decisions will ultimately be made not by me or by Ferris or by anyone else who writes about this subject, but by individual teachers. It is essential that they be presented with both sides of the question and be allowed the chance to make informed judgments of their own. My work on this subject will have served its purpose if it gives teachers an op-

portunity to consider correction-free instruction as a serious option for their teaching.

NOTES

1. Actually, Ellis (1998) discussed an earlier version of the paper. I will consider only the later version, which became available after his paper was published.

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