

COMMENTARY

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# 25 years on, the written error correction debate continues: an interview with John Truscott

Hassan Mohebbi<sup>1,2</sup>

Correspondence: [hassan.mohebbi973@gmail.com](mailto:hassan.mohebbi973@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup>SAM Language Institute, Ardabil, Iran

<sup>2</sup>European knowledge Development Institute, Ankara, Turkey

## Introduction

Since the publication of ‘the case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes’ in 1996, written corrective feedback has become a controversial issue in second language writing instruction (Lee, 2020; for a review, study Reinders & Mohebbi, 2018) as far as almost every single article investigating the effect of feedback on L2 writing improvement refers to this paper (citation = 2480). On the one hand, Truscott, in a series of research publications (Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2016; (Truscott: The efficacy of written corrective feedback: A critique of a meta-analysis, unpublished); Truscott & Hsu, 2008) argued against the perceived and claimed positive effect of written corrective feedback on improving writing accuracy of L2 learners. On the other hand, some well-known scholars such as Bitchener (2008, 2012a, 2012b), Bitchener and Ferris (2012), Bitchener and Knoch (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010, 2015), Ellis (2009), Ferris (1995, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015), Guenette (2007), Hyland (2010), and Lee (2013, 2016), to name but a few, have studied the potential role of written corrective feedback in L2 writing from different perspectives to provide support for the positive role of correction in L2 writing and offer strategies for L2 language writing teachers. After 25 years, we may have a better picture of the research findings to evaluate correction effectiveness in L2 writing. Therefore, we interviewed Professor John Truscott to have his feedback on feedback research.

**Many thanks for giving me this opportunity to interview you.**

1. First of all, the first question I would like to pose is the primary motivation for writing the paper ‘The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes (1996)’?

That paper was the result of several things coming together. One was my own experience as a writing instructor. I was conscientiously correcting my students’ errors but not seeing any meaningful benefits to their writing. I heard similar concerns from frustrated colleagues, unhappy that their students kept making the

same mistakes after being repeatedly corrected on them. At the same time, I was doing a lot of reading on various topics in second language learning/teaching, in an effort at self-education, and correction was one topic that caught my eye. There was lots of evidence that correcting was a bad idea, a view that fits well with my experience and my understanding of the nature of language and learning, and was also suggested by the complexities of the feedback process. However, what I saw in the literature and in practice was an unquestioning acceptance of correction. This situation called for a strong statement, telling teachers that there is a choice to be made and presenting the case for the no-correction option.

I should maybe add that error correction has always been a secondary interest for me, a detour from my main interests, which are in cognitive science, especially as it relates to language. People in writing instruction have occasionally noted that I disappear from the field for several years at a time. That is because I am pursuing other interests.

2. Did you expect to receive responses from other researchers? What made you write a response to Ferris, after 3 years, in 1999?

No, I thought the paper would probably be ignored, like all the experimental work that was already pointing to the futility of correction. Regarding my response to Ferris, the immediate reason for writing it was that the editors invited me to, which of course was appropriate since her paper was explicitly a critique of my earlier paper. I accepted the invitation to show that everything in the original 1996 paper remained valid and that there was no genuine case *for* correction.

3. What did you find most challenging in Ferris's argumentation for feedback and correction?

Well, to be blunt, I did not find anything particularly challenging. If I have to pick out one thing, I suppose it would be drawing out the implicit assumptions in that argumentation, mainly the burden of proof assumption. I hope that readers interested in this topic will go through those two papers together, compare them point by point, and refer back to the 1996 paper where appropriate.

4. If you could turn the clock back, would you add or remove any argument or counter-argument to your paper in 1996?

I would say that paper has stood up pretty well over the years. I might adjust some details of the presentation and change the emphasis in places, but I do not see a need for any substantive changes in the arguments.

5. In the past 25 years, we have seen many published papers that indicate the positive effects of error correction. Ferris, Bitchener, Knoch, Ellis, Guenette, and Lee were the leading researchers. Do you reject all the findings? Is there not any research paper that touched your heart?

First, I would disagree with the statement that those papers indicate positive effects of error correction. I have discussed that at length in various places and will not go into the specifics here. Interested readers might look at the paper I recently uploaded to ResearchGate, “The efficacy of written corrective feedback: A critique of a meta-analysis”. Is there any paper among them that especially impresses me? No, not really. Some clearly have their strengths, in design and methodology, for example, and in the interesting data, they produced. However, I do not see any study that has made a meaningful case that correction is effective. More importantly, the issue is what the overall body of research says. In my judgment, it says, quite clearly, that correction does not work— it does not help learners improve their ability to write accurately.

6. After 25 years, if you would like to summarize the main gaps of the studies supporting the positive effect of written corrective feedback, what would they be?

I am not sure about “gaps”, but there is a long list of problems with the claims that studies have shown positive effects. Again, I would refer readers to my various papers on this subject, especially the most recent one, on ResearchGate. I am not very comfortable giving a short, superficial summary of these big issues ... but here goes.

Many studies are so narrow and specialized and/or artificial that they have little relevance to teaching; this is what made it possible for them to get good results. A couple of others were not actually about second language learning (titles should not always be trusted). Several studies commonly cited evidence that correction works did not address the question but looked instead at how different types of correction compare to each other. Others compared groups that were given a learning task plus correction on it to a group that did not get the learning task (or correction on it, of course), and the authors then invalidly concluded that the correction was responsible for observed differences in the performance of the groups. In the past, favourable reviews of correction often included studies which showed only that learners could (sometimes) use the corrections they receive to revise the writing on which they received them. Such studies were lumped together with research that looked at the effect of correction on learning. I think the field is finally getting over this bit of folly. Finally, we should not forget that there is a substantial body of studies that clearly found correction unhelpful or even harmful, findings that are often inappropriately dismissed or misrepresented.

In this context, I would like to note an interesting observation that has been made in meta-analyses of correction work, both written and oral—an apparent paradox in the research findings. The strongest results come from studies that did very little correcting, typically providing students with feedback only one time. The weakest results come from studies that provided feedback several times over an extended period. For a correction-skeptic like me, this seemingly bizarre finding makes perfect sense. The longer, more serious studies were efforts to test correction as it is done in language classes and as it affects learners’ ability to use the language accurately in realistic ways. They found that correction does not work. The experiments using brief treatments and obtaining strong results were typically very artificial, with little relevance to actual teaching and learning; and this artificiality is what made their strong results possible.

So if you see this body of research as pointing to the failure of correction as a teaching tool, then there is no paradox; the facts are as expected. But if you want to tell

teachers that the research supports the use of correction, then you have a problem. The advice you offer should apparently be something like this: "Give your students corrective feedback on one assignment and then be sure to avoid giving any further feedback in the class". This appears to be a logical consequence of the claim that the research has found correction effective. If it is not, then those who make this claim need to offer a convincing explanation for the paradox. The absence of such an explanation is a serious gap.

7. You have mentioned that one of your main research interests is the cognitive aspect of language learning. Do you think that a possible reason for learners' failure to learn from feedback is that they do not have explicit and implicit knowledge of the teacher's target structure?

Yes, certainly. One part of the case against correction is that in order for a given instance of correction to succeed a great many different things, all have to go right. Failure in any one of them can render the correction ineffective or even harmful. Knowledge of the target structure is one of the areas where things can go wrong.

8. Don't you think that you should have done more experimental research to provide counter-evidence in the response of the proponents of written corrective feedback?

I do not think there is any shortage of experimental research showing the futility of correction. The issue is how this body of research has been (mis)interpreted. The literature has always been filled with statements that the evidence supports correction. The more critical assessments say that significant support for the practice exists, but findings are inconsistent. What is needed, now more than ever is a critical voice challenging these overly optimistic claims. Most importantly, teachers need to know that there is a choice to be made, and they need to be presented with both sides of the issue.

That said, I do think worthwhile experiments can be done, and I am interested in doing some.

9. If you want to call for papers to examine the effectiveness of written corrective feedback, what would be the main research questions?

The main answer is the one that I have always given. Research should try to identify special, limited ways in which correction might be useful. The question of error types is especially interesting. I wrote a paper on this long ago, speculating on what types might be correctible and suggesting that experiments should be done on them. But that has not been pursued. In their published reports, I would also like to see authors present much more information on how different error types responded to correction in their experiments.

A second type of research that I would suggest is work that seeks to clarify the implications of existing research findings. One example is the study that Angela Hsu and I did on the distinction between feedback as input for revision and feedback as a tool for learning, showing that findings commonly treated as evidence for learning actually have nothing to say about it. Another is Ekiert and di Gennaro's conceptual replication of

the Bitchener and Knoch research (2021). They found that the latter's narrow focus made the treatment look much more successful than it actually was (and in the process raised doubts about its value even within that narrow focus).

10. Today, we have many options to get learners' writing corrected by software and give them great support. What is your stance regarding the potential contribution of technology to L2 writing instruction? Do you not think that technology can compensate for the weakness in teachers' practice and strategies in writing classes?

I think the potential of technology in this area, and others, is worth exploring. Computers are very good at keeping track of the errors each learner has made, for example, and they do not suffer from inattention and fatigue problems. In the context of the overall case against correction, I am skeptical about how far such things will take us. More generally, the use of technology in education has produced many false hopes and disappointments in the past. Whether current efforts will prove different is an open question and an interesting one.

11. How do you draw the picture of the road ahead in this field of research?

Based on the current state of things, I would say the prospects are not very good. I see a field in the grip of a kind of groupthink, with discussion dominated by researchers who share a favourable view of correction and continually reinforce each other's core beliefs on the subject, beliefs that reflect tradition and intuition, and further reinforced by these factors. In my judgment, one result is that support for correction is seen where it does not exist, and contrary evidence is dismissed or downplayed. Not a healthy situation for the development of a research field. But of course, my own biases on this topic have always been clear.

12. As you may endorse, writing is an essential skill. When you reject written corrective feedback, what is your replacement? Do you not accept any kind of strategies that have been proposed, namely focused, unfocused, direct, indirect, and metalinguistic feedback?

Writing is a very important skill. So if writing instructors feel obliged to devote considerable time and energy – theirs and their students' – to practices that do not work, then changes are needed.

How can we replace correction? The question is a familiar one, but to me, it is an odd thing to ask. When we talk about replacing something, we assume that something serves a useful function; we then ask what else could serve that function equally well. My thesis is that correction is not serving any function. So the question of how it can be replaced is to me quite odd. On the other hand, if the question is simply how we can fill the time that is currently devoted to correction, I do not think teachers need any advice from me. There is never enough time in a writing class to do everything as extensively or intensively as it could be done; abandoning correction will allow teachers to spend more time on whatever they think is most in need of that additional time.

As for the different ways to correct, I do not find the distinctions among direct, indirect, and metalinguistic feedback particularly interesting – we should be about equally skeptical toward all of them. Focused correction is a more interesting topic since it ties in with the question of error types. If it can be shown that particular types actually do benefit from correction, then feedback that focuses on those types might be appropriate, subject to questions of practicality. On the other hand, unfocused feedback sees correction as a general purpose tool, which it is not.

13. What about teachers' pedagogical knowledge, their language proficiency, and their writing assessment literacy? Is it not possible to find fault with teachers concerning the alleged ineffectiveness of correction?

Limitations in teachers' knowledge and ability certainly belong on the list of things that can make correction ineffective. However, I do not see this as finding fault with teachers, and I do not see any prospects of changing the situation in any meaningful way. Teachers are humans, languages are insanely complex, time is limited, and we have no science of writing instruction to guide teacher training. It is noteworthy that proponents of correction have not achieved any consensus on providing feedback, even on fundamental issues like comprehensive vs selective or direct vs indirect vs metalinguistic.

14. As the last question, what is your suggestion for language teachers? What should they do in teaching writing? How should language learners study writing?

First, I should acknowledge that apart from the special topic of error correction, I am not an authority on writing instruction. For most familiar practices, I do not have any critique to offer or any strong endorsement. I would like to see some serious research into the effectiveness of standard practices and possibly some changes in response to its findings, but I do not have anything to say on that. On a more positive note, I think the role of input deserves more attention than it commonly gets in writing instruction. If you want to learn to produce good written English (for example), you need very extensive experience seeing and processing good written English, getting a feel for what good writing looks like. I'm afraid this rather obvious point has been obscured by an excessive concern with errors and grammar rules.

**Many thanks for your time and your responses.**

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#### **About the authors**

Short Biography (John Truscott)

John Truscott is a professor in the Institute of Learning Sciences and Technology and the Center for Teacher Education at National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan. His primary research interest is the Modular Cognition Framework (formerly known as MOGUL, or Modular Online Growth and Use of Language), a broad cognitive framework aimed at bringing together research and theory from a variety of areas in order to better understand language as a part of the human mind. He has also published extensively on the topic of error correction and in other areas of second language acquisition, bilingualism, and linguistics, including form-focused instruction, vocabulary learning, extensive reading, the nature and roles of conscious and unconscious learning, and a variety of other theoretical topics. He is the author of *Consciousness and Second Language Learning* (2015, Multilingual Matters) and co-author, with Mike Sharwood Smith, of *The Multilingual Mind* (2014, Cambridge University Press) and *The Internal Context of Bilingual Processing* (2019, John Benjamins).

Hassan Mohebbi holds a PhD in TEFL. His main research interests are written corrective feedback, assessment literacy, first language use in SLA, and teacher's pedagogical knowledge. He has co-edited special issues with Christine Coombe for *Language Testing in Asia* and *Language Teaching Research Quarterly* journals. He is an editorial board member of *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* (Springer), *Language Testing in Asia* (Springer), *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* (Taylor and Francis), *Language Teaching Research Quarterly* (EUROKD), *Frontiers in Psychology*, and *Frontiers in Communication*. <https://publons.com/researcher/1445975/hassan-mohebbi/>.

#### Author's contributions

Hassan Mohebbi had the idea of the paper, and John Truscott accepted the interview invitation. The interview was conducted in different stages, in which it was revised, and new questions were posed. The author(s) read and approved the final manuscript.

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