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A Response to Truscott's 'What's Wrong with Oral Grammar Correction'

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Teachers and researchers alike are aware of the challenges and complexities involved in providing effective feedback on error to second language (L2) learners in classroom settings. Any account of these challenges and complexities should aim to provide helpful and reliable information supported by research relevant to classroom practice. John Truscott fails to do this in his paper, presenting instead a critique that is, for the most part, impressionistic and unsubstantiated by research.

If Truscott had argued that it is difficult to know when, how, and what to correct in classroom L2 teaching, then we would have little to disagree with. However, he argues instead that because it is difficult, and because its effectiveness cannot always be demonstrated, 'error correction' should be abandoned. We will disagree with Truscott's recommendations and argue that a growing body of classroom research provides evidence that corrective feedback is pragmatically feasible, potentially effective, and, in some cases, necessary. This research includes descriptive and experimental studies of form-focused instruction and feedback on error – studies which Truscott has either failed to include in his review or misrepresented and dismissed in his discussion.

Although Truscott uses the terms *correction* or *oral grammar correction*, we prefer the terms *feedback on error*, *corrective feedback*, or *error treatment*, which reflect the observation made by Long (1977) that what the teacher can do is to provide information to the learner, but it is the learner who will (or will not) eventually 'correct' the error. Although he does not provide a definition of the term, for Truscott, 'correction' seems to involve both an overt signal to the learner that an error has been made and some kind of explanation which can lead only to metalinguistic knowledge. The classroom research we will describe shows that feedback on error can be provided in a wide variety of ways, most of which do not include explanation or promote metalinguistic

knowledge, but rather make the correct form more salient to the learner or give the learner an opportunity to draw on linguistic competence which is not always used in communicative interaction.

Feasibility of corrective feedback

In contrast to Truscott's claim that 'correction, by its nature, interrupts communicative activities' (p. 442), some classroom studies have shown that corrective feedback can be integrated in ways that do not break the flow of interaction (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Lapkin & Swain, 1996; Lightbown, 1991; Lyster, 1994, 1998b; Spada & Lightbown, 1993). Further, Truscott provides no references to support his claim that feedback causes 'embarrassment, anger, inhibition, and feelings of inferiority' (p. 441). In studies of content-based, immersion, and intensive communicative classrooms ranging from Grade 4 to Grade 8, Doughty and Varela (1998), Lyster and Ranta (1997), and Spada and Lightbown (1993) found that this was not the case. Teachers provided feedback as they interacted with students, who, in turn, appeared neither traumatized nor frustrated; instead they appeared to expect such interventions as an intrinsic part of the classroom process. In any case, it is not only in corrective feedback that teachers need to take account of individual students' personalities. Teachers must do this in all aspects of their teaching – questioning techniques, content delivery, task design, or testing.

Truscott argues that one of the reasons that feedback on error does not work is that it is not provided consistently. Although consistency in error treatment may be rare because teachers do not notice or choose not to react to some errors, we question Truscott's implication that corrective feedback must be consistent to be effective. In arguing against the feasibility and the effectiveness of corrective feedback, Truscott seems to advocate instead exposure to input as a sufficient requirement for L2 learning. Yet, if corrective feedback needs to be consistent to be effective, would it not follow that the input to which learners are exposed should also be consistent? We wonder how it would be possible for teachers, without resorting to structural drills and audiolingual dialogues, to control the input in communicative classrooms so that it is always consistent.

Truscott's claim that lack of knowledge about developmental sequences makes corrective feedback impossible is also untenable. We agree that information about developmental sequences is not adequate to guide teachers in their provision of instruction or feedback. However, we would argue that evidence from current research is far

from overwhelming that learners benefit *only* from developmentally matched instruction and feedback (see Lightbown, 1998).

Truscott rightly points out that recasts used as corrective feedback in communicative classrooms may be ambiguous to learners who understand them as conversational moves. However, abandonment of all corrective feedback for this reason again reveals a polarized and unreasonably dismissive position. We would argue instead that there are ways of making the purpose of recasts more salient in classroom discourse. For example, some studies have shown recasts to be less ambiguous when teachers shorten the learner's utterance to locate the error and then add stress for emphasis (Chaudron, 1977; Lyster, 1998a; Roberts, 1995). In Doughty and Varela's (1998) study, the teacher preceded the recast with a repetition of the error so as to highlight the target-non-target mismatch (see also Tomasello & Herron, 1988, 1989). Lyster and Ranta (1997) also found recasts to be ambiguous but observed a sufficient number of alternative feedback moves to make a dismissal of all feedback seem both unrealistic and unnecessary. Some of the earliest studies of error correction in L2 classrooms revealed considerable ambiguity and inconsistency (e.g., Allwright, 1975; Fanselow, 1977; Hendrickson, 1978), but none of the researchers argued for the complete abandonment of corrective feedback. Instead, these early classroom studies led researchers to recommend that teachers should draw on a wider range of feedback types (see also Corder, 1967; Vigil & Oller, 1976).

Truscott argues that classroom learners are unlikely 'to take the correction seriously' or 'to accept it.' Again, this is not a problem that is particular to error treatment. It applies equally to all aspects of classroom learning (lessons, tasks, homework, tests, etc.). More specific to error treatment, Truscott rightly argues that students in communicative classrooms are unlikely to notice all instances of corrective feedback. However, observational studies suggest that students do notice some corrective feedback. For example, in the Lyster and Ranta (1997) study, learner *uptake* followed over half of all the corrective feedback moves. While not an indication of learning per se, learner uptake is nonetheless an indication that the learner is responding in some way to the corrective feedback (see also Doughty, 1994).

Although he gives no references, Truscott writes that 'a common feeling among advocates of correction is that for a given instance to be incorporated (i.e., to have a lasting effect) the student must not only notice and understand it but also deliberately rehearse it and make use of it' (p. 446). We would argue instead that many 'advocates of correction' are more likely (a) to stress the importance of integrating the

feedback into meaningful interaction, without necessarily breaking the communicative flow; and (b) to consider the effects of the feedback to be gradual, not immediate (e.g., Lightbown, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Long, 1996; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Schachter, 1983).

In his dismissal of corrective feedback, Truscott claims that teachers' 'time and effort would be better spent on other aspects of teaching' (p. 444), but he fails to spell out what these other aspects of teaching might be. In addition to depicting error treatment as a traumatic experience for students, he argues that the problems inherent in error treatment 'place a tremendous burden on the teacher' (p. 444). This may be a reflection of Truscott's narrow view of error treatment as involving overt signalling and metalinguistic explanation. Two discourse models of error treatment that derive from actual classroom observations (Chaudron, 1977; Lyster & Ranta, 1997) describe optional discourse moves for error treatment, and both reveal that teachers and students have a wide range of responses at their disposal. These and other descriptive studies indicate that providing corrective feedback is a feasible discourse move that neither damages student morale nor prevents communication.

Some of Truscott's claims underestimate the abilities of experienced language teachers, many of whom, according to some of our own classroom research, have a good sense of their students' language performance and needs. For example, experienced teachers *are* able to detect and understand some of their students' grammatical errors; although the source of many grammatical errors is difficult to determine, this is not the case for all. Corrective feedback that does not include explanation or require the sort of 'understanding' of errors that Truscott views as so difficult, is often quite straightforward.

Effectiveness of corrective feedback

According to Truscott, 'available evidence suggests that oral correction is ineffective' (p. 447). He supports this claim with references to various studies, some of which were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s in classrooms where instruction and error treatment were based on audiolingual teaching methods (Ellis, 1984; Lightbown, 1983; Lightbown, Spada, & Wallace, 1980). In such classrooms, learners rarely participated in meaningful interaction. Instead, their classes were dominated by drill and repetition of set material. The relevance of those studies as the basis for evaluating the effectiveness of error treatment in current communicative language teaching settings is questionable.

Truscott interprets van den Branden's (1997) study of dyadic interaction as supporting his position, but the study does not provide any evidence against the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Truscott claims that the group who received the negotiation of form treatment declined considerably in accuracy. In fact, this group made the highest overall gains on a variety of post-test measures, and it was only the low proficiency learners in this group whose accuracy scores declined. It is important to note, however, that the interaction during which feedback was provided lasted only seven minutes. Furthermore, during this time, the researcher provided negotiation of form after only 15% of the students' grammatical errors and negotiation of meaning or content after another 15%. Thus, 70% of grammatical errors went untreated during this seven-minute task.

There are other relevant studies that have investigated the effects of feedback provided during one-on-one interaction – studies to which Truscott has not referred (e.g., Carroll & Swain, 1993; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998). These studies showed positive results for certain types of feedback provided consistently in response to specific errors. However, the results of such studies, in which the researcher provides feedback in a controlled one-on-one situation, may not be readily applicable to classroom settings.

DeKeyser's (1993) study is also referred to as demonstrating the ineffectiveness of feedback on error. In that study, the teacher was not asked to focus on any particular constructions, 'in order not to confound error correction with an increase of attention to specific forms' (pp. 505–506). Thus, corrective feedback was provided at random, and although six specific features of French grammar were targeted on the tests, there was no evidence that these forms were focused on or even that they occurred during the treatment. Despite this limitation, the results indicated that some students did benefit from the corrective feedback. DeKeyser found that, after the feedback treatment, (a) students with high pre-test scores did better on a written grammar post-test; (b) students with low extrinsic motivation did better on oral accuracy and oral fluency post-test measures; and (c) students with low anxiety did better on a written grammar post-test.

Truscott questions the research methods used in two classroom studies showing positive effects for feedback (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1990). In both studies, feedback on error was provided in content-based or communicative contexts.

Truscott's dismissal of the Doughty and Varela (1998) study remains a mystery to us for at least four reasons. First, this study, set

in the midst of ongoing classes and integrating focus on form with regular classroom activities, has great ecological validity. These are real ESL learners, engaged with their teacher in tasks which are part of their regular program, not learners recruited to participate in a laboratory experiment of short duration. Second, contrary to Truscott's claims, the scoring procedures in this study *did* account for the inappropriateness of overuse (i.e., verb forms used outside of obligatory contexts). Third, Truscott finds it strange that interlanguage forms used in obligatory contexts were also included in the analysis. In our view, this represents a strength, not a weakness, because it acknowledges that learning is incremental and that progress cannot always be measured in terms of target-like performance. Truscott himself points out that learning is gradual and that one should not expect all-or-nothing results of any instructional intervention. Fourth, Truscott argues that, because the study did not test learners' knowledge/performance of the target forms in contexts other than science reports, there is no evidence that learners could immediately apply their new knowledge in other contexts. However, there is no evidence that they could not do so. Because their improvement in oral performance in comparison to the control group not receiving corrective feedback was substantial and was maintained two months later, the learning may well have been robust enough to effect change in their interlanguage development. The fact that improvement was observed in only one context is not a basis for dismissing the validity of the study. We may expect that what gets learned in one context can eventually be generalized to others. This is an empirical question – one which merits further investigation in classroom research.

As Truscott points out, the Lightbown and Spada (1990) study is based on post hoc analyses of classroom transcripts. In the classrooms observed in that study, the pedagogical focus was almost always on communicative interaction, and teachers rarely provided any focus on form or corrective feedback. However, there was some evidence that when teachers did provide some form-focused instruction and corrective feedback, there was a positive effect on some aspects of learners' interlanguage development. Lightbown and Spada emphasized, however, that this descriptive study could only generate hypotheses for future research. In several experimental studies since that time, they have found some confirmation that, within communicative language teaching, school-age learners can benefit from focus on form and corrective feedback (Spada & Lightbown, 1993; White, 1991; White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991). Other researchers have reported similar results with adult learners (Williams & Evans, 1998).

General comments

The tone of Truscott's paper is such that a reader would conclude that teachers should never provide corrective feedback after errors of any type. He cautions in his conclusion, however, that the issues he raises should not be casually extended to errors in pragmatics or pronunciation. Yet, in his introduction, he writes, 'a similar case could be made for other types of errors (e.g., in pragmatics or pronunciation), but I will not attempt to do so here' (p. 438). The reader is thus left confused as to whether Truscott recommends that teachers should withhold corrective feedback after all errors or only after grammatical errors. If corrective feedback is to be withheld only after grammatical errors, then one wonders how feasible it might be for teachers to instantly classify students' errors as unequivocally non-grammatical (given, for example, the potential overlap between morphology and phonology and between grammar and vocabulary). Even more puzzling is why corrective feedback, which, according to Truscott, is so irreparably harmful both to students' morale and interlanguage development, is purported to have these negative effects only in the domain of grammar.

According to Truscott, his argument against feedback applies to the negotiation of form and does not extend to the negotiation of meaning. Yet by restricting his view of error treatment to overt or explicit correction, Truscott seems not to account for any type of negotiation. This may be why he argues so strongly against feedback on the grounds that it is obtrusive. However, research has revealed a variety of feedback types in communicative classrooms (e.g., Chaudron, 1977; Lyster & Ranta, 1997), some of which are more explicit than others and some of which provide unobtrusive opportunities for negotiation. Swain (1985) has argued that, to enhance the interlanguage development of classroom learners, negotiation strategies should be implemented in ways that 'push' learners to produce language that is not only comprehensible but also accurate. In classrooms where this occurs, then, we can expect some overlap between negotiation of meaning and negotiation of form. For example, Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that immersion teachers often used clarification requests as a type of corrective feedback, not because they did not understand, but rather to draw attention to non-target forms. Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morgenthaler (1989) found that clarification requests were effective at getting language learners to modify their non-target output. Similarly, Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) found that some learners progressed in their acquisition of past tense forms after receiving feedback in the form of clarification requests.

Overall, there is an anachronistic quality to Truscott's paper. At times the reader seems to have been placed in a kind of time warp where the prevailing assumptions about L2 teaching and learning are that (a) exposure to naturally occurring samples of the target language is all that learners need to develop their L2 and (b) error treatment is not helpful and, in fact, is harmful. Almost twenty years ago, a similar argument was made by Krashen (1982). He claimed that the teaching of grammar should be abandoned because it interfered with the natural course of the L2 learner's development. As an alternative, he argued that exposure to comprehensible input would be enough for L2 learners to develop an L2 grammar. Since that time, L2 classroom researchers have had the opportunity to investigate the effects of 'correction-free' and meaning-based instruction on L2 learning, and the results have revealed persistent problems in L2 learners' syntactic development. The evidence suggests that, while a great deal of L2 learning takes place through exposure to comprehensible input, learners may require feedback on error when they are not able to discover, through exposure alone, how their interlanguage differs from the L2 (for some theoretical arguments, see Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985, 1988; White, 1987).

Conclusion

While we would agree with Truscott that there are many challenges and complexities involved in providing effective feedback for L2 learners, we clearly disagree with his conclusion that feedback on error should be abandoned. On the contrary, in our view, there is increasing evidence that feedback on error can be effective. What is needed is continued systematic and rigorous research to investigate whether different types of feedback are more effective than others and to what extent this may be dependent on the instructional contexts and the characteristics of learners within them.

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