

If at First You Don't Succeed ...

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Abstract

This research focusses on how errors are generally regarded in the process of language learning, and more specifically in the written production. The starting point of the present work is the existing debate on the subject between John Truscott and Dana Ferris. While the former defends the necessity of abandoning all grammatical correction, the latter stands for quite the opposite enhancing the benefits that derive from such practice. The controversy generated by both authors on the matter raised the question of where language learners actually stand on the issue. This paper documents pertinent research conducted with a mixed group of English language learners at the *Sección de EOI* (Official School of Languages) in Laguna de Duero. Generally speaking, the findings seem to be unmistakably favourable to Ferris.

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“If at first you don’t succeed,...” is the beginning of a saying, part of our lore, which makes reference to the need of making mistakes in order to learn. In fact, the importance that mistakes and errors have always been bestowed cannot be denied, with independence of the methodological perspective they have been studied under. Moreover, one of the main changes regarding error consideration has been closely related to its value within the process of acquiring a language rather than as an indicator of the rate of achievement obtained, as had been traditionally regarded, considering error as a deviation of the linguistic system of the language studied.

However, despite regarding the error as a guiding element of the learning process, not all scholars, teachers and learners agree on the idea of correcting it. The choice that the educational community faces does not only refer to whether errors should be corrected or not, but also to how and why they should be corrected. It is from this dilemma that Truscott-Ferris’ debate issues forth.

Since it is undeniable that learners play a key role in the teaching/learning process, the main aim of the present article is to address their position before errors and their correction. For that purpose, a study has been carried out based on a survey conducted with a mixed group of English language learners at the EOI Laguna de Duero (Sección de EOI Valladolid, Spain).¹

Truscott-Ferris’ Debate

When John Truscott published his article “The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes” (1996) describing grammar correction not only as an unnecessary but also harmful practice, an interesting debate arose on the beneficial and detrimental effects derived from grammar correction. In 1999, Dana Ferris took up the gauntlet and responded Truscott with her article “The Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes: A Response to Truscott”, countering his position. Soon other voices would join in a debate that still prevails.

Truscott’s Thesis

Truscott asserts that researches have failed to analyse the process of correction from a critical perspective, paying little attention to the effect this has on learners’ attitudes or to how much time and effort consuming such practice in writing lessons is.

Truscott focuses on *interlanguage* studies, highlighting the underlying psychological processes inherent to that of acquiring a language. He adds that the syntactical, morphological and lexical knowledge are acquired in different ways and, therefore, different ways of correction should be applied to each of them.

When analysing the effects of different pedagogical approaches, he asserts that researches should take into account not only whether something has been learnt but also what type of learning has been generated in order to check to what extent the teaching/learning process has been effective.

¹ EOI stands for *Escuela oficial de idiomas* (Official School of Languages) in Spanish.

Truscott defends that an effective correction involves several requirements, among them the teacher's ability to recognise errors which are relevant in the learner's development and to give a satisfactory answer to them in a consistent and systematic manner.

Likewise, not only does John Truscott stress learners' negative attitude towards writing but he also concludes that grammar correction significantly harms the complexity of learners' production as a consequence of the unpleasantness associated to correction.

Before the defence of grammar correction as a practice required by the learner, Truscott asserts that, in most cases, the latter is only replicating some beliefs instilled by the teacher. He goes on to point out the great dependence learners have on teachers regarding the different pedagogical approaches and, thus, error correction.

Ferris' Thesis

As a response to Truscott's article, Ferris (1999) states that the error correction practice in writing is and has always been a worrying matter within the teaching/learning process of a language. In her revision of Truscott, Ferris claims problems of precision in the definition of grammar correction and adds that, since some learners benefit from it to some extent, grammar correction may be considered efficient.

However, she agrees with Truscott on considering that there are reasons to believe that the acquisition of syntactic, morphological and lexical knowledge is achieved in different ways and, thus, should be subject to different ways of correction. Ferris uses this coincidence, though, to defend that learners can be taught to self-correct. And, in doing so, Ferris expresses her preference for the indirect grammar correction (error identification) to direct grammar correction (the teacher's correction of the learner's errors).

Clearly, teachers need a good linguistic, syntactic and pragmatic theoretical base of how to teach grammar to second language learners and have to establish a priority of errors to correct, always bearing in mind that learners respond differently to grammar correction.

Dana Ferris concludes that, instead of fostering the neglect of grammar correction as proposed by Truscott, it would be more suitable to search for new and more effective ways of correction. The reasons she alleges are based on the studies on learners' opinion regarding feedback, which support the relevance of such information (Cohen 1987; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994, Leki, 1991; Radecki and Swales, 1988) and on the reflection of many teachers who claim that no grammar correction can frustrate learners to such an extent that it may interfere with their motivation and self-confidence when writing. This issue gains relevance when such errors may prevent learners from achieving their academic goals.

Other considerations

Although Truscott does not make any explicit reference to any pedagogical approach, he is inferred to defend the position that in order to control the writing skills, it is necessary to master the process of writing besides having a good grammatical knowledge. He seems to take for granted that all learners have fully developed their writing skills in their first language and are just seeking for a personal way of expression in the second one. However, what happens to those learners who are acquiring a second language at the same time as they are developing their writing skills in their first language?

Truscott seems to speak in absolute terms when analysing results, not taking into consideration the different variables present in the teaching/learning process of a language (cultural background, motivation, context,...) He also ignores learners' cognitive styles as he does not provide differentiated responses for any of them, which contradicts his argument that the different pedagogical approaches should respond to the different learning procedures. Besides, he obviates essential elements of the teaching/learning process when he rejects Ferris' reasons in favour of grammar correction, namely, learners' and teachers' attitudes towards it and the development of the skill to self-correct.

In spite of basing his thesis on the interlanguage theories, Truscott does not show any interest in analysing nor describing the idiosyncrasy of the learner's idiolect, which is where the true difficulty relies when trying to understand the stage a learner is at. He simply presumes that there are certain types of errors that learners are not able to self-correct without giving any reasons for such occurrence, clearly contradicting his thesis of abandoning grammar correction. For her part, Ferris acknowledges the limitations grammar correction still has but insists on searching for new ways so as to make it more efficient.

In any case, both authors pay special attention to the learner as the focal point of the teaching/learning process, however, their positions differ when they analyse the figure of the teacher. Whereas Ferris defends that the teacher should help and guide the learner with all the difficulties that may arise, Truscott rejects such relationship, arguing that such disposition only generates a relationship of dependence between the learner and the teacher.

The educational context

Before proceeding, it is relevant to analyse the institution where this teaching/learning process takes place as it plays an important role in the development of such process since the institution establishes a syllabus with very clear objectives, which have a direct impact on the teaching/learning process.

In this particular case, the Official School of Languages, the institution in which the present study has been carried out, is guided by the criteria described by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which takes into account the development of communicative strategies, namely, avoidance strategies and compensation strategies. The former, which means a downward readjustment of the message, contradicts Truscott's thesis; the latter is a more positive approach since the

learner proposes solutions to their deficiencies. Interestingly, the CEFR also accepts error making as an intrinsic part of the process of writing.

However, the Official School of Languages does not only work as a teaching entity but also as a certifying one and here it also follows the guidelines indicated by the CEFR. In this respect, special attention should be paid to the disparity existing between the type of evaluation tool preferred by the teachers, on one side, and the educational administration and students, on the other side. While teachers opt for an evaluation method that focuses on the progress made, educational institutions and students tend to prefer one where results prevail. As teachers, we should ask ourselves where we stand regarding assessment criteria and the tools used when assessing.

What is the connection between the teaching and assessing roles the EOI has and, hence, of the teacher working there? Unfortunately, the teaching role is not as closely related to the assessing role as expected. In fact, there is a clear division of the teacher's roles that is evident in the dissociation between the teaching/learning process that occurs along the academic year and the evaluation one at the end of it.

We can conclude, therefore, that assessment is not included within the teaching/learning process as it should be and that it is simply considered as a certifying tool. Independently from the fact that there are placement tests as well as progress and summative tests, all of them take place at a certain moment and analyse limited linguistic samples, which might not prove to be so reliable in regards to reflecting the progress made by the learner along the teaching/learning process.

What is the learner's attitude before error correction?

A survey was carried out at the EOI in Laguna de Duero (Valladolid, Spain) in May of the present academic year (2013-2014) with the objective of analysing the learner's position before error correction. A total of 94 ESL learners took part in it, representing all the levels taught at the institution (A1-A2, B1-B2)² and having Truscott-Ferris' debate in the background.

In order to determine the learners' profile several factors were taken into consideration, such as age, knowledge background, motivation, language competence and prior experience in the learning of a language.

² A1-A2 levels of competence make reference to a basic user and B1 and B2 to an independent user, according to the CEFR.

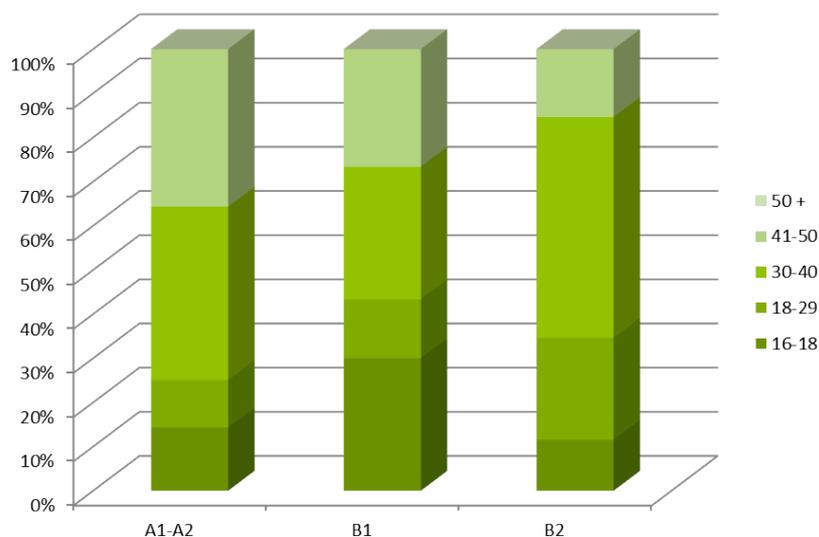


Fig. 1 – Age

As seen in Fig.1, there is a great disparity as far as age is concerned depending on the levels of language competence – the basic learner being the older, followed by B2 and B1, respectively.

As for their knowledge background, whereas the basic learner’s profile shows a wider diversity of studies, ranging from primary school to university studies, as the learner progresses in language competence, this scope becomes more limited with a clear prevalence of university studies.

Although over 50% of the learners surveyed claim to have prior experience in learning another language, this is not equal for all levels: 50% in the basic stages and B2 level, whereas 65% of the B1 learners surveyed indicated that they had prior experience in language learning. This is a direct consequence of the generalisation of language teaching and learning in the Spanish education system, which reflects on the younger generations having direct access to the intermediate stages at the EOI.

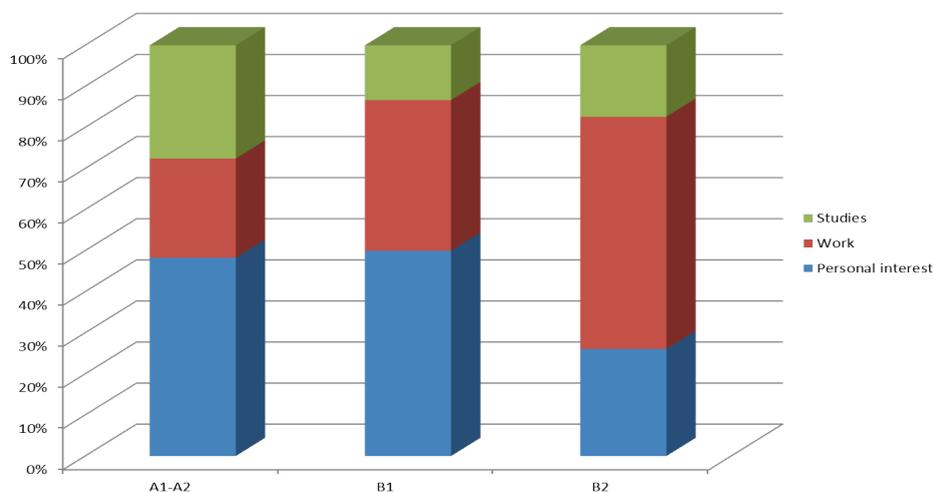


Fig. 2 - Motivation

Another essential factor is learners' motivation to study another language, in this case, English. Once again there is a clear difference between levels: basic learners tend to study another language out of personal interest whereas the independent user is guided by the need to complete their studies or to improve their chances of obtaining a better job. This is a direct consequence of the socio-economic situation Spain is currently undergoing.

How do you feel when corrected?

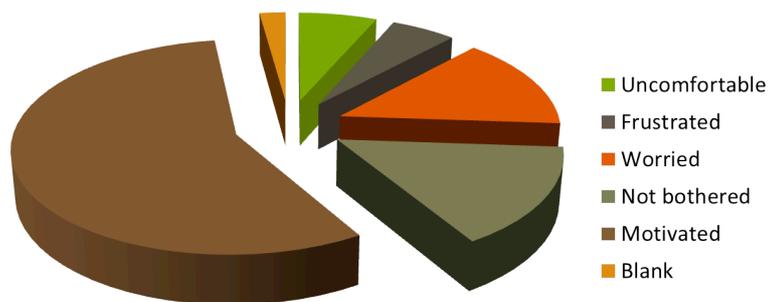


Fig. 3 – Feelings when corrected

Interestingly, 97% of the learners surveyed perceive error correction not only as positive but also as necessary in the learning process, considering it motivating. In fact, just a minority claims to feel uncomfortable or frustrated, represented by a 7% and 5%, respectively (See Fig. 3).

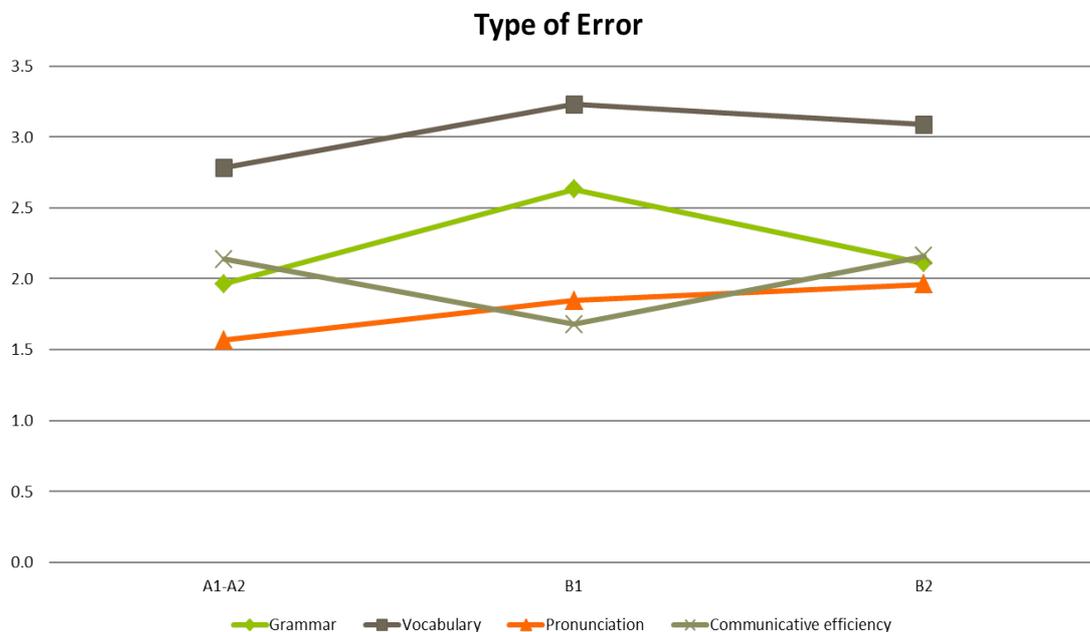


Fig. 4 – Types of error

As for the type of error to correct, generally speaking and regardless the levels of language competence, there is an agreement on granting more relevance to grammar and vocabulary versus pronunciation and communicative efficiency. However, just a

minority of the students surveyed considers it necessary to correct those errors which do not interfere with communication.

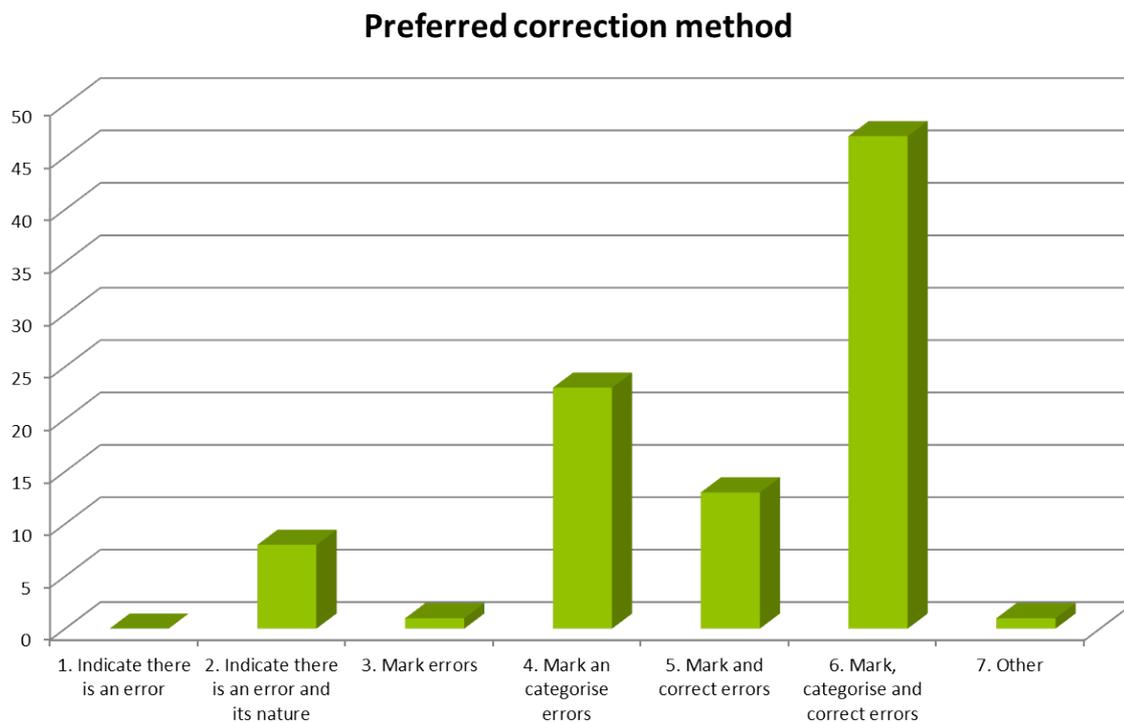


Fig. 5 – Preferred correction method

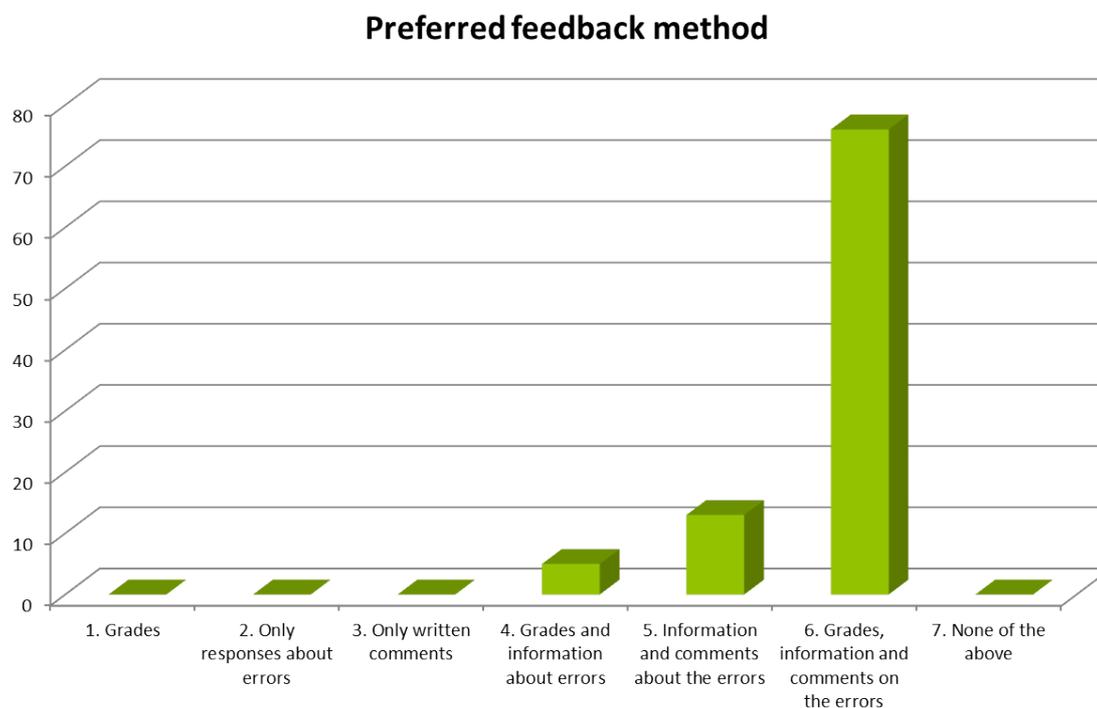


Fig. 6 – Preferred feedback method

Both in the preferred feedback method and that of error correction (see figures 5 and 6, respectively), there is a tendency to depend on the teacher as most students support

the option of having the teacher mark, categorise and correct errors as well as report and give advice for improvement. In any case, the learner's language competence should be taken into account when analysing this aspect since the degree of independence the learner has in the use of a language is in accordance with their knowledge of the language and how comfortable they feel when using it.

With regards to the learner's position before error correction methods, it is advisable to highlight that, independently from identifying, categorising and correcting errors, there prevails in learners the need to be qualified as an indication of the learning point they are at. Obviously, the way learners are assessed at the Official School of Languages underlies in the learner's subconscious, that is, assessment has a direct impact on the teaching/learning process.

It is interesting to see how learners confirm the criteria described by the CEFR when they highlight the need for self-assessment and peer assessment as complements of the external assessment performed by the teacher. In fact, those learners who have had some experience in self-checking (levels B1 and B2) defend the need of a more independent learner, claiming that it is the latter's responsibility to try to amend errors once marked and categorised as "that is the best way to learn from them".

Finally, a large majority has indicated that they have not participated in an error correction free context but declared themselves decisively against the idea, asserting that such occurrence would only generate confusion. There are, however, some learners who pinpoint some positive aspects of not being corrected:

"Es positiva porque te permite participar más libremente, aunque también **te hace trabajar más lo escrito para intentar ser concreto y conseguir que se te entienda bien.**"³

"Es posible que cometa más errores de los que pienso. Creo ayuda a buscar formas de expresión por nuestra cuenta aunque en ocasiones puede que lo hagamos de forma incorrecta. Lo considero positivo. **Ayuda a crear nuestro propio idioma, de forma personal.**"⁴

In the case of the previous comments, learners are making reference to a blended-learning experience in which they took part and in which not all the tasks were subject to such control.

Conclusions

In light of the aforesaid, what may be concluded? There are several aspects to take into account when developing the teaching and assessing process.

³ Translation: "It is positive because it allows you to participate more freely, although **it makes you work a bit more on what you write in order to be more precise and make sure you are understood.**"

⁴ Translation: "It is possible that I make more errors than I think. I believe this environment helps me look for new ways of expressing myself although sometimes I might make mistakes. I consider it positive. **It helps me to create my own language, in a more personal way.**"

First of all, since the learners' profile is so varied depending on their level of language competence, the same methodological approach cannot be used indistinctly for each, as the different learning styles and cognitive processes should be addressed properly. It is interesting to note that learners consider grammar and vocabulary more important than communicative efficiency. Does this mean that Truscott was right when he stated that learners merely reflect their teachers' beliefs? More than likely so, which is not necessarily negative since all along their learning process learners will be exposed to different ways of understanding such process and will have to discern which ones meet their needs best. If we consider that a teacher should be a guide for the learner, their beliefs are part of that guidance.

As regards to Truscott-Ferris' debate, the findings of the survey seem to support Ferris' position rather than Truscott's as learners defend not only external assessment, but also self-assessment and peer assessment. Furthermore, in agreement with Ferris, learners defend that the lack of error correction may lead to confusion and hence frustrate learners depriving them of self-confidence. This becomes especially relevant if the error made interferes with the learner's academic goals as it is the case in the education context we have been analysing.

Nonetheless, Truscott's position is present as well in some of the answers obtained in the survey. More specifically, in the answer of some of the learners who had participated in a blended-learning experience mentioned before, since they agree with Truscott in the idea of searching for new ways of expression in the L2.

However, one specification should be made: whereas the findings defending Ferris' position are supported by all students, regardless their level of competence, Truscott's is supported by learners who have quite a high command of the language and are considered independent users, as he himself had anticipated.

In the blended-learning experience referred to, learners were exposed to both controlled and control free situations, therefore the participants' comments cannot be analysed in absolute terms since such learners benefitted from both correction and the lack thereof. Therefore, it may be concluded that a balance between correction and correction free situations should be sought in any teaching/learning process.

All things considered, we should reflect upon what our attitude before errors is. When teaching/assessing, what factors do we take into consideration? Do we take into account learners' communicative strategies? To what extent? Do we, as teachers, reflect together with the learners upon the teaching/learning process? Do we guide them in such reflections? Do learners have a clear idea of their progress independently from the certificate of a certain level of language competence attained? How can we contribute to their enlightenment?

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