The effect of teacher correction and student revision on university A-level student written accuracy
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1. Introduction

This essay is about the effects of teacher correction and student revision. I find this area of research very interesting, since whether to correct or not and the effects that correction might have on students’ learning is often discussed in teacher education which I am currently undergoing. The sources used in this essay consist of various articles, both pro and contra correction/revision, whose authors either discuss research done by others or research that they themselves have conducted on the subject. Books that deal with teaching and learning have also been used and university A-level students have contributed with their essays.

First, I will review the arguments about correction and revision that I have found in my various sources. Both sides will be considered and a picture of what I might expect to find in my study will be drawn up, accordingly to existing research. I will then present the results of this study, followed by a discussion about what conclusions can be drawn from the data presented.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this essay is to see whether error correction on written assignments followed by student revision might have a positive short-term effect on student written accuracy.

1.2 Hypothesis

Error correction followed by student revision in a university A-level writing course will have a positive short-term effect on student written accuracy, i.e. will result in a decline in error rate.
1.3 Research questions

If students at a university A-level writing course get their essays corrected and are asked to revise, do they:

a) manage to correct the errors in their first drafts

b) continue to make the same kinds of mistakes in the following assignments

c) improve in accuracy, i.e. show a decline in error rate

1.4 Subjects

Their writing course teacher asked the students who participated in this study if they wanted to be part of the study. The four subjects are university A-level students of English in a writing course in Sweden. Not all of them have Swedish as their mother tongue. The four students have been given made-up names to protect their identities.

1.5 Method

This study is an observational study and it looks at the first four assignments in a university A-level writing course, which went on for ten weeks while I was engaged in it. There were two shorter essays of about one page, and two longer of about two and a half pages. There has been no personal contact between the subjects and I and we have never met. The students handed in their essays to the teacher, who graded and corrected them and copied them before handing them back to the students. I then received the copies with the corrections. The same procedure was used for the revisions. There was only form feedback and no content feedback. Some errors were simply underlined, some were underlined and substituted with a more correct form and some were categorised by the teacher either with or without the correct form. The data from each of the four students will be analysed in separate case studies.
The method used for extracting error rate per 100 words was as follows. The words in the essays were counted. Compound nouns such as science class were counted as two words, as well as compounds like well-being but compounds that look like lifetime, were counted as one word. Numbers were counted as words, for example “11” is one word as is “2”. Dates and numerals, such as “11th” were also counted as one word. When the words had been counted, the errors were counted as well. The number of errors in each essay was then divided by the number of words in each essay. The outcome was multiplied by 100 to give the error rate, which is used when talking about the essays. Two decimals are used to better show small differences in error rate.

The different categories used for categorization of errors were partly inspired by Ferris and Roberts (2001) but also by looking at the essays and what kinds of errors the students make, as well as the kinds of categorization the teacher used when responding to students’ errors. The aim was to have as few and narrow categories as possible that would still cover all of the student’s errors and make them clearly visible and comparable. Six error categories were then created: verb, spelling and vocabulary, preposition, sentence structure, plural, and determiner. Ferris and Roberts (2001) define five error categories in their article about error feedback – verb errors, noun ending errors, article errors, wrong word and sentence structure errors. The categories verb and sentence structure were taken from Ferris and Roberts while the other categories were inspired by comments made by the teacher.

Errors that fit into the category verb are verb errors such as agreement, tense and aspect. Spelling and vocabulary errors are either spelling errors or errors where the wrong word or expression has been used. Preposition of course has to do with prepositions such as on, at, under, by. Sentence structure errors are quite a large group that contain word order errors as well as errors in sentence and clause boundaries, such as run-ons and fragmentation. Plural errors are errors where students do not acknowledge the difference between countable and
uncountable nouns or simply fail to supply a plural form when such is needed. Finally, the
determiners here belong to nouns and involve words such as *a, the, my, our*.

2. Background

This essay deals with teacher correction on EFL (English as Foreign Language) students’
written assignments in a university level writing course. There is an ongoing debate about the
positive and negative effects of teacher correction in ESL (English as Second Language)
/EFL writing courses. Worth noting is that there is an important difference in definition
between EFL and ESL, the former being language taught in a formal environment where the
target language is not a language spoken in the community, and the latter being language
learning in a community where the target language is spoken. Formal language teaching is
not necessary for ESL learning (Gass 2001). Most of the research this essay builds on comes
from the field of ESL research, but this does not mean that results cannot be compared with
those from EFL research. Truscott (1996) does not believe that there is such a big difference
between the two and when he looks at different studies he places no importance in either the
students’ first languages (L1s) or if the studies deal with ESL or EFL learning:

“First, the results probably cannot be explained by the differences between FL and SL
learning, the identity of the target language, or learners’ L1. The studies that found
correction ineffective included ESL, EFL German FL, and Spanish FL; besides, the
students L1’s differed greatly.” (Truscott 1996:334).

Little seems to be known about the area of correction, and researchers do not even agree
on whether certain studies show correction to be effective or ineffective and use them as an
argument on both sides, interpreting the results of the studies differently (Truscott 1996,
1999; Ferris 1999). Two of the sources used by Ferris (1999) as positive evidence for error
correction are not even, according to Truscott (1999), clear and relevant positive evidence.
Truscott and Ferris both refer to the findings of the same study and use them to support their
much different arguments. James (1998), who is pro-correction, also interprets some research in his favour while Truscott, who is anti-correction, does not acknowledge the very same study as pro-correction (Truscott 1999). Despite this, an attempt will be made to review the most important arguments and possible evidence on both sides.

2.1 Correction: its effects on student writing

2.1.1 On the contra side

The main voice on the contra side in the present debate is John Truscott. In “The case against grammar correction” (1996) he claims that correction is ineffective and his claim is supported by various studies. Truscott (1996, 1999) says that there are many ways in which the correction process, as he calls it, could fail. First, students might not be interested in correcting their errors. It is simply boring and perhaps considered a punishment. Second, students might not always understand the corrections made by the teacher and fail to provide the correct form. Or, third, the student might be able to correct, but not understand the underlying principle and therefore continue to make the same mistake again and again. Correction should therefore, unless it is proven efficient, be abandoned as it is potentially harmful for student language learning. (Truscott 1996, 1999).

Truscott (1996) continues by saying that it has been found by another researcher on the subject of grammar correction that students who receive error correction become afraid of making the same errors again, and end up avoiding the specific constructions that cause the problems, resulting in no learning. In my opinion this would probably only be the case though if the students have not understood the teacher’s correction.

Truscott (1996) has looked into both revision and non-revision studies and he claims that he has found no compelling evidence that revision would be helpful.
2.1.2 On the pro side

The pro side claim to have found evidence that teacher correction can be effective in various ways (Chandler 2003, Ferris and Roberts 2001, Hyland 2003). Especially Ferris (1999) rejects the ideas posed by Truscott that correction is ineffective and believes that his exhortation to abandon correction poses a threat to students, since correction, unless the opposite is proven, must be considered an important part of language learning. Edge (1989) and James (1998) believe that correction might be a necessity and Gass (2001) says that it is possible that adult learners must receive negative evidence in order to learn a language.

On the basis of her own research, Hyland (2003) draws the conclusion that some students are more able to correct their errors than others. Her subjects were ESL university students in New Zealand attending an English proficiency programme course in preparation for post- and undergraduate studies. Hyland’s subjects were given both form focused and content focused feedback and she looked at to what extent students made use of teacher feedback in their revisions. The writing assignments consisted of descriptive, argumentative and research essays both in class tests and home assignments. Hyland found that some students were more able to correct their errors than others, but also that all of the students were quite successful in making their revisions. Some students in Hyland’s study also showed a decrease in grammatical errors that were problematic to them, such as sentence structure problems and use of articles. Whether this was due to the rewriting or if the same result could have been attained with correction only is not speculated on by Hyland (2003).

Chandler (2003) claims that correction without revision does not lead to increase in accuracy, while correction followed by revision does, and he bases this claim mainly on his own research. The subjects in his study were first or second year ESL students at an American conservatory. They were all high intermediate or advanced learners of English. One experimental class received error correction and were asked to revise and one class, the
control group, received error correction but did not revise their assignments until after the study had ended. The assignments were mostly autobiographical. One of Chandler’s research questions was whether students who have to correct their errors start making fewer grammatical and lexical errors. His conclusion is that no revision of first drafts equals no feedback on error at all. Chandler writes: “The control group, which did no error correction, did not increase in accuracy while the experimental group showed a significant increase” (p 279). According to Chandler, correction is necessary for students’ learning, but no error feedback will lead to no improvement in the students’ writing abilities. The crucial thing is that the students do something with the error and not simply receive and forget it.

2.1.3 What might be expected according to existing research

According to Truscott (1996, 1999), there might be some negative effects that follow from teacher correction and asking students to revise. A claim which is made is that students will not be interested in correcting their errors because having to do this can be seen as a punishment and is essentially considered boring. Then, the A-level students might very well, despite teacher instructions, fail to correct and hand in their corrected versions. Those who do correct might fail to correct everything because they have not understood the teacher’s correction (Truscott 1996, 1999). Students who do in fact correct and provide the correct form might very well not grasp the underlying principle and continue to make the same kind of mistake (Truscott 1996, 1999). It might also be the case that the students stop using a specific construction since they have had it corrected before and become afraid of using it; they come to depend on avoidance strategies in order to avoid being corrected.

The pro side says that correction is necessary for adult language learning (Edge 1989; James 1998; Gass 2001) and it must therefore be assumed that students will learn from the
corrections and thereby increase in accuracy. The error rate will be expected to decrease and students will learn correct forms by being corrected and discontinue using the erroneous forms. Some students might also be able to correct their errors far more than other students. Since no revision according to Chandler (2003) is supposed to equal no correction feedback at all, the students who revise may be expected to improve in accuracy far more than those students who fail to correct their errors.

3. Results

Students were supposed to hand in a total number of seven essays during the ten first weeks of the course. Those seven essays consist of four first drafts and three revised essays. The outcome, though, was not as expected. Students either failed to hand in all four first drafts or all three revisions. Only one student handed in all first drafts and all revisions to be analysed.

3.1 Case study one, Yvonne

The material received from Yvonne is made up of four assignments and three corrections. She is the only student who hands in as many as three revisions. It is not known whether she revises her fourth essay or not since the study ended before any such information was received. As can be seen in the table below, Yvonne shows an increase in error rate between the first and the third essay, with the middle one having a slightly lower number of errors per 100 words. The fourth essay is the one with the lowest number of errors. Yvonne's first draft contains 6.25 errors per 100 words, her second assignment 5.05 errors per 100 words, her third assignment 6.97 errors and her fourth assignment contains 4.21 errors per 100 words. See diagram 18 on page 35 for all students’ first drafts.

None of the revisions Yvonne makes are carried out completely successfully, i.e. none result in an error rate of 0.00. Yvonne is the only student who hands in all assignments and all
revisions, and so it is interesting that she actually increases her error rate in the third assignment. What is striking in the table below is that it shows an increase in problems with the category determiner, and also reveals what seems to be a problem with revising the essays.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Errors per 100 words in first draft/revision</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Spelling and vocabulary</th>
<th>Preposition</th>
<th>Sentence structure</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Determiner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 1 : 180 words</td>
<td>6.25/1.09</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 2 : 277 words</td>
<td>5.05/1.42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 3: 825 words</td>
<td>6.97/0.83</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 4 : 975 words</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first essay contains 180 words and five errors. This gives an error rate of 6.25 per 100 words. The errors are found in the categories spelling and vocabulary, sentence structure and determiners.

Diagram 1

Already in the first essay Yvonne shows a tendency towards having problems with using determiners correctly. The essay is very short and the number of instances where problems can be noticed are very limited. In the revision of the first essay, an essay which contains 183
words, Yvonne has two errors. One of the errors is a sentence structure error which was marked in the first draft but has not been corrected in the revision. The second error is a determiner error, which was not marked as an error by the teacher when it appeared in the first draft and corrected by the teacher only in the revision.

The second essay contains 277 words and 14 errors, distributed over the categories verb, spelling and vocabulary, preposition, plural and determiner. In the diagram below, the distribution of errors is more clearly visible.

Diagram 2.

The revision of the second essay contains 282 words and 4 errors. Here the error rate is perhaps not completely accurately expressed by the statistics, because the teacher has not corrected errors in the draft which he corrects in the rewrite. The teacher also, in the rewrite, corrects his own correction from the draft. “Few public transport” is changed to “a little public transport” in the first draft. In the revised essay the teacher changes the, by the student supplied form, “a little” to “limited public transport”. The only error that actually remains from the draft is a spelling error that the student has tried to correct but has failed to do so correctly.

The third essay contains 825 words and 59 errors, which gives the highest error rate in all of her four essays, 6.97 errors per 100 words. The errors are found in all six categories.
Determiners have become a real problem in Yvonne’s third essay. The revision of the third essay contains 847 words and 7 errors. One of the errors, a verb error, has been corrected wrongly, because the teacher has only underlined the error, without giving suggestions and Yvonne gives another erroneous form in the revision. Two other errors have simply not been corrected though marked as erroneous and three are new ones that the teacher does not correct in the first draft, but only in the revision. One of the errors in the revision seems to stem from Yvonne not understanding the teacher’s correction.
The fourth essay is 975 words long and contains 41 errors. The errors are yet again found in all six categories.

Diagram 4.

In this essay determiners remain a serious problem and no other error category seems to be nearly as problematic as determiners. No revision of the fourth essay is available for analysis.

Yvonne’s most problematic area is quite clearly determiners. While the first two essays might have been too short to make many such errors, the third and fourth essays show her haltering knowledge. Spelling and vocabulary and sentence structure also cause quite a lot of problems. Yvonne both generalises the rules in the category of determiners and omits determiners where such are needed. She writes: “the new members in European Union”, then failing to supply the determiner the before European Union. She also writes “the Poland and other states”, inserting a determiner where there should be none. Two determiner errors and one sentence structure error are found in the following sentence taken from the fourth essay: “Secondly, media frame also common points of the events in history…”. Here there is a determiner missing in front of media and the determiner before events should be deleted. The words frame and also create a sentence structure error as they stand now. The correct word order would be also frame.
Vocabulary errors are often a result of words being used incorrectly or given erroneous forms, such as “anyone who may be depended” instead of *dependant*. In the case of preposition errors, either the wrong prepositions are used or none can be found where there should be prepositions. Yvonne writes: “I have demonstrated only (a) positive point (of) view the English language”. The teacher’s corrections are in the brackets.

Yvonne manages to revise errors to a greater extent than the table shows in both the first, the second and the third revision, due to the fact that the teacher corrects mistakes in the revision which he did not correct in the first draft. The teacher also corrects one of his own corrections in the second revision.

Yvonne receives rather extensive correction on her first longer third essay and she is given many opportunities to learn from correction, especially in the area of determiners from which most of her errors derive. It is therefore interesting to look at the difference in number of errors between the third and the fourth essay. Yvonne’s error rate decreases in the areas verb, spelling and vocabulary, preposition, and plural in her fourth essay, as can be seen below, but there is no development, either positive or negative, in the category of determiner.

Diagram 5.
3.2 Case study two, Caroline

Four assignments and one revision were received from Caroline, with the revision belonging to the first assignment. Caroline is the student who reduces her error rate the most. She goes from 8.65 errors in her first essay to 3.98 in her second and 3.67 in her third. Even considering that quite small number of words and errors might cause somewhat hazardous statistic results, there is indeed, in this case, a big difference in error rate. However, in the fourth essay, the error rate goes up to 5.15 errors per 100 words. The positive development does not continue throughout all four essays.

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Errors per 100 words in first draft/revision</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Spelling and vocabulary</th>
<th>Preposition</th>
<th>Sentence structure</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Determiner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 1: 207 words</td>
<td>8.65/2.90</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 2: 502 words</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 3: 844 words</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 4: 991 words</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Caroline’s first essay contains 207 words and 18 errors. This is a quite high error rate, surpassed by no other student in the study. In the first essay, Caroline experiences problems with the categories spelling and vocabulary, preposition, sentence structure and determiner. Spelling and vocabulary is by far the most problematic category.
In Caroline’s revision there are 6 errors, but only one which remains completely uncorrected from the draft. Two errors were not corrected by the teacher in the draft and corrected only in the revision, one is a new error, which occurs only in the revision, and one sentence structure error is corrected wrongly. One failure to correct successfully seems to come from Caroline not understanding the teacher’s correction.

The second essay contains 502 words and 20 errors. Caroline experiences problems with all six error categories.
Spelling and vocabulary is still causing Caroline the most trouble, even though sentence structure and plural do not lie far behind. Since there is no revision on essay two, it is impossible to know how Caroline manages to correct her errors.

The third essay contains 844 words and 30 errors. The errors can be found in all six categories, although it is still in spelling and vocabulary that Caroline displays the largest amount of errors, 17 in this essay. She also has verb errors, preposition errors, one sentence structure error, plural errors and determiner errors.

Diagram 8.

The fourth essay is 991 words long and contains a total number of 51 errors. Errors can be found in five of the six categories. The essay contains four verb errors, as many as twenty-eight spelling and vocabulary errors, five sentence structure errors, four plural errors and ten determiner errors. The increase in error rate in this essay mainly compared to the third essay comes from the categories spelling and vocabulary and determiner.
A look at the table and the diagrams reveals that the area in which Caroline experiences the most problems in all three essays is that of vocabulary and spelling. In her first essay as many as eleven out of eighteen errors belong to this category. Many of these errors are words that have been misspelled, such as antropology (anthropology), phychology (psychology) women (woman) and preposition (proposition). Caroline also has determiner errors. Just like Yvonne, Caroline both generalises the rules that govern the use of determiners and fails to supply determiners where they are actually needed. This can be seen in sentences such as “when they are on telephone”, “the society has created stereotypical male and female gender identities” and “in the other words”. Caroline also has some plural errors where erroneous forms such as “researches” instead of research are used.

Even though the overall error rate decreases in the third essay, some categories become more problematic. In the first essay, Caroline does not have a single agreement error. Agreement errors, which fall under “verb”, are noted as a problem by the teacher in the third essay. Caroline tends to have problems with agreement in the second essay as well, but it becomes substantially more obvious in the third essay. It is possible to say that this problem does not diminish, but rather, it increases as the course goes on. The third essay shows a
rather positive development with a decrease in error rate and more accuracy in some areas, such as sentence structure and plural. Though both the first and the second essay contain fewer words than the third, the number of sentence structure problems are the lowest in the third essay. In the fourth essay, these categories yet again become problematic. There is also an increase in spelling and vocabulary errors and determiner errors in the fourth essay. Caroline does however show a decrease in errors in the category of preposition between the third and the fourth essay which are the two longer essays. There is no change in number of errors in the category of verb. In all other categories Caroline actually becomes less accurate in the fourth and final essay. This negative development in terms of accuracy leads to a higher number of errors per 100 words in her fourth essay compared to the third essay.

Diagram 10.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Change in number of errors from previous essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spell and voc</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence structure</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determiner</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Case study three, Anna

In the case of Anna, the data that can be analysed consists of three essays and no revisions. Anna is the only student who shows an increase in error rate from the first to the second essay. The third essay is unavailable for analysis. In the fourth essay, the error rate is not as high as in the second essay, nor is it as low as in the first essay. The number of errors per 100
words is 3.14 in her first essay, 4.85 in her second essay and 4.29 in her fourth. See diagram 18 on page 35 for all students’ first drafts.

Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Errors per 100 words. No revisions</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Spelling and vocabulary</th>
<th>Preposition</th>
<th>Sentence structure</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Determiner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 1 : 207 words</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 3 :</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 4 : 746 words</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first essay contains 207 words and 9 errors. Anna shows problems in the categories verb, spelling and vocabulary, preposition, and determiner. Spelling and vocabulary seems to be the area in which she experiences the most problems.

Diagram 11.

The second essay contains 309 words and 15 errors, which is quite an increase in error rate – from 3.14 in the first essay to 4.85 in the second. Her errors are rather static, meaning that she still has two verb errors, one preposition error and two determiner errors in the second essay,
just as in the first essay. In the second essay she furthermore has one sentence structure error and three more spelling and vocabulary errors than in the first one.

Diagram 12.

![Diagram 12](image_url)

The fourth essay is 746 words long and contains 31 errors which can be found in five of the six categories. Though the error rate decreases in the fourth essay it does not get as low as in the first essay. The higher number of errors is due to an increase in problems with verbs, spelling and vocabulary and determiners. Spelling and vocabulary are still the main problems, but Anna also has clear problems with verb in her fourth and final essay.

Diagram 13.

![Diagram 13](image_url)
Anna’s foremost problem in all essays is with spelling and vocabulary, a fact which might explain why her error rate increases and then drops in a rather unpredictable way. Different topics will require different knowledge of vocabulary, and thus it might be possible for one person to write in a way that might increase or even decrease the error rate in a rather unrepresentative way. Anna’s increase in error rate in the second essay almost exclusively derives from the area of spelling and vocabulary. In the fourth essay her problems with spelling and vocabulary are prominent as well, as can be seen in the diagram above. These errors are often misspelled words, as in the following sentence where one word is misspelled and the other has taken the form of a verb instead of a noun: “to wright (write) job applies (applications)”. Some words are also used incorrectly: “More or less everyone has a dialect even if you do not hear it that obvious (clearly)” The teacher’s corrections are in brackets. Another area which also causes problems in all three of her essays is verb. The main problem is with agreement. One example is the sentence: “The consequences that arise when I don’t have a working computer is (are)…”

Since no third essay is received from Anna, measuring development in terms of change in the number of errors from the previous essay is difficult. The fourth essay is substantially longer than the second and that affects the diagram. In order to make a good diagram of Anna’s development by the fourth essay, the errors per 100 words in her second and fourth essays have been counted and then been multiplied by ten in order to make the diagram clearer. The error rates have then been contrasted and the result can be seen below.
Anna reduces her error rate in two areas, spelling and sentence structure. Two categories show no change and there is an increase in error rate in two categories.

3.4 Case study four, Lars

Lars has contributed with two essays and one rewrite, with the rewrite belonging to the second essay. He shows a decrease in error rate – 3.97 in his first essay and 3.0 in his second essay.

In the table below a rather interesting discovery can be made. In the revision of the second essay, Lars has an error rate of 2.89 per 100 words which is not much less than his first draft which contained 3.00 errors per 100 words.

Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Errors per 100 words in first draft/revision</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Spelling and Vocabulary</th>
<th>Preposition</th>
<th>Sentence structure</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Determiner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lars</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay1 : 378 words</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 2 : 346 words</td>
<td>3.00/2.89</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first essay contains 378 words and 15 errors. Lars has problems with the categories verb, spelling and vocabulary, preposition, sentence structure, plural and determiner. The distribution of errors is more clearly visible in the diagram below. As can be seen, spelling and vocabulary errors appear to be a greater problem than any of the other categories.

Diagram 15.

![Diagram 15](image1)

The second essay contains 346 words and 13 errors. Lars has one verb error, spelling and vocabulary errors, sentence structure errors and one determiner error. As can be seen below, spelling and vocabulary is the area where most errors can be found, although there are quite a few sentence structure errors in this essay as well.

Diagram 16.

![Diagram 16](image2)
The revision of the second essay contains 381 words and 11 errors. The fact is that when Lars revises his essay, he only corrects two out of thirteen marked errors. The rest are left untouched and a majority again marked as erroneous by the teacher. It is not known why Lars fails to correct his errors to such a great extent.

The problems that Lars has with prepositions and plurals in the first essay are not visible in his second essay. This is probably because he talks about time and the clock in his first essay and there are some prepositions associated with this particular semantic area which he does not fully grasp, as can be seen in the following sentence taken from his first essay: “The class should be ended (at) a quarter before (to) twelve”. The teacher’s corrections are in brackets. The area causing Lars the most problems in both essays is spelling and vocabulary. Some examples are that Christmas is not spelled with a capital C, and each other is written as one word. There are also obvious slips of the finger such as “human kind if (is) an adaptive one” and “some of them are quite impossilbe (impossible)”. An increase in error can be seen in the category of sentence structure in the second essay compared to the first one. Lars has one sentence structure problem in his first essay and four in his second. The sentence structure errors in his second essay are mainly fragmentation errors caused by using a full stop where a comma would be more suitable.

Although the data received from Lars only consists of two essays it is possible to make an attempt to look at his development in terms of accuracy, since the two first essays, which are the only ones received from him, are about the same length.
Lars remains stable in number of errors in the category of determiner between the first and the second essay. Spelling and vocabulary and sentence structure become more problematic but Lars manages to decrease his number of errors in three areas.

4. Discussion

4.1 Discussion of problems

It is important to be aware of the fact that the error rate is a somewhat hazardous measurement of accuracy. Differences that in the statistics appear rather striking may in fact be caused by very small differences in number of words and errors, due to the fact that some of the essays do not contain a very high number of words. Differences in error rate within a single individual may very well depend on specific topics. A large gap in error count in the category of spelling and vocabulary between two essays could possibly be explained by more or less knowledge of the vocabulary required by the topic. Different topics will, as said before, require different knowledge of vocabulary, and thus it might be possible for one person to write in a way that might increase or even decrease error rate quite a lot. However, the error
rate gives a hint about what the situation is like and makes it somewhat more visible, and it is considered to be a good enough method.

Keep in mind as well that this essay deals with a short-term perspective; the students were followed for ten weeks and during that time wrote four essays; which means that actually attaining a decrease in error rate might be difficult. One student, Lars, has only handed in two first drafts and one revision. The fewer essays the more difficult it becomes to measure development. In the case of Anna, not a single rewrite has been handed in.

Considering the fact that the teacher in this course fairly often gives the correct form for the students to fill in, correcting should not be difficult. However, the problems that some of the students nevertheless show with correcting their errors, problems that are visible in the statistics, are partly due to the fact that the teacher corrects errors in the revision which he did not correct in the first draft, which increases the student’s error rate in the revision. There are of course also instances where students fail to make appropriate corrections. Also, when judging whether the revision has been successful or not, consideration is mainly given to the teacher’s notes, which means that failure to correct errors may be overlooked simply because the teacher, upon reading the essay a second time, chooses not to mark the errors that have not been corrected and remain erroneous.

4.2 Discussion of results

The students in this study are mostly successful when it comes to correcting their mistakes considering the circumstances with previously unnoticed errors and corrections of corrections made by the teacher. Perhaps they would not have been as successful in correcting if the teacher had not quite as often given the correct forms. Regrettably, not that many revisions are handed in, but the corrected essays that do find their way back to the teacher show few signs of serious problems with correcting. The only revision handed in by Lars will have to stand as
an exception to this otherwise successful pattern of correction. Lars did, as seen above, not manage to correct more than two out of thirteen marked errors in his first and only revision.

According to Truscott (1996, 1999) correction might fail as a means of teaching simply because students are not interested in correcting their mistakes. It is considered boring by learners and might even be regarded as a punishment. Whether the students in this study believe correcting mistakes to be boring or not is unknown. What is known though is that many of the students did not hand in their revised essays. One single student, Yvonne, hands in all three rewrites, Caroline and Lars hand in one each and Anna does not hand in a single revision. The students who do not hand in all rewrites, might very well have corrected their mistakes, but not handed in their essays a second time. However, it might also be the case that Truscott is right. Perhaps making students correct their essays failed during this course due to student attitudes towards correction and revision.

Truscott (1996, 1999) also says that students who do make attempts to correct their mistakes might fail in doing so due to not understanding the teacher’s corrections. Data which is found in this study does support Truscott’s argument, but not to any large extent. Yvonne is the only student who appears to misunderstand the teacher’s correction, and this only happens once. Lars’ inability to correct errors is not believed to come from not understanding the teacher’s corrections. It is then concluded that misunderstandings in corrections are not really an issue, at least not between the students and the teacher in this particular course.

An argument against correction put forth by Truscott (1996, 1999) is that students might very well be able to correct their mistakes, but fail to understand the underlying principles. This, he argues, might be a reason for why students continue making the same kinds of mistakes after being corrected. The tables of errors presented in each case study above reveal that most students in this study continue making the same kinds of mistakes although the number of errors might increase or decrease in different essays. Applying Truscott’s
explanation to these findings is possible in terms of some error categories, but not in others. A majority of the students in this study, Caroline, Anna and Lars, experience most problems with the category of spelling and vocabulary. With spelling and vocabulary, finding any underlying principles is difficult. The students who make spelling and vocabulary errors do so in all essays, but the words which are miss-spelt or used wrongly vary depending on topic. There is no general rule that they can learn how to apply in this area and so they have not misunderstood any rules. Other categories of errors are more easily analysed in this context. One example is determiner errors. There are rules to the use of the articles *the* and *a* and there are also many instances in language where articles are used. Therefore, students’ understanding of underlying principles is perhaps more easily observed here. The same could also be said for the categories plural, preposition and verb. A factor that should also be mentioned in this context is fossilisation. Even after a great deal of exposure to and instruction in a language, learners may continue to make the same mistakes because certain “interlanguage patterns” have become fossilised and difficult to change (Lightbown and Spada, 1999:175).

There are no signs of avoidance strategies in the students’ essays, though Truscott (1996, 1999) expects students to use this strategy in order to avoid being corrected. Avoidance strategies are difficult to detect, but since students continue making the same kinds of mistakes, they cannot be said to avoid any particular areas that have caused them problems earlier during the course.

Yvonne experiences problems with the more easily examined categories previously mentioned, and her main problem is not with spelling and vocabulary, but with determiners. In this area, she continues making the same kind of mistakes in all the essays. Though she receives rather extensive correction on determiners in her third essay, there is no sign of any positive development in this particular area in her fourth and final essay. Revising has not
helped her reduce her error rate in this particular error category, perhaps because she, as Truscott (1996, 1999) predicts, has not understood the underlying principles though she has been able to correct her determiner errors.

Yvonne does nevertheless show some positive development. In the fourth essay she is more accurate in four categories – verb, spelling and vocabulary, preposition and plural – than in her third essay (see diagram 5 on page 15). According to Chandler (2003), no revision equals no correction at all and so Yvonne ought to increase in written accuracy more than those who do not rewrite. In fact, none of the other two students from whom a fourth essay is received show such positive development as Yvonne in their fourth essays, although Anna’s development is measured differently since she does not hand in a third essay, but this is only to make it possible to contrast her second and fourth essay. Lars increases in accuracy in three areas between his first and second essay, but the only revision received from him belongs to the second essay and so his development cannot be accredited to revision (see diagram 17 on page 26). Caroline increases in accuracy in one category and decreases in four (see diagram 10 on page 20). Her development by the fourth essay is in other words not very positive. The diagram of Anna’s development by the fourth essay does show some positive development. She decreases in error rate in two areas (see diagram 14 on page 26). Whether or not these differences in development in accuracy between the only one who revises as asked and the students who do not revise as asked can be accredited to revision is difficult to say due to the limited amount of data. It could however be argued that since Yvonne revises all essays, her development must be a result of correction in collaboration with revision. Thus, it may be also argued that correction followed by revision might have positive effects on student written accuracy. No evidence is found that would support the opposite, but Yvonne’s development does support the hypothesis that correction followed by revision might have a positive short-term effect on students’ written accuracy. Yvonne shows the most positive development by
the final essay of all four students. However, a lot more data than that presented here would be required to make any clear and general statements about student development as a result of correction and revision.

5. Conclusions

Possibly because of negative student attitudes towards correcting mistakes, few revisions were handed in for analysis. Truscott (1996, 1999) may be right when he says that students do not want to correct their errors. This assumption is based on the fact that only one student in this study hands in all required revisions. However, students mainly succeed in correcting their errors and avoidance strategies do not appear to be an issue. This can be seen in the few revisions that are nevertheless handed in. The tables which show error rate in the revision might not always portray reality in a good way though, since the teacher sometimes corrects errors in the revision which he had not corrected in the first draft or does not again mark uncorrected errors as erroneous.

It is found that most students in this study continue making the same kinds of mistakes even after being corrected. Some of these instances of inability to increase in accuracy in some areas are due to the nature of the error categories, but others appear to come from students not understanding the underlying principles, as Truscott (1996, 1999) suggests. They might also be a result of fossilisation. It would be interesting to look at whether students continue making the same kinds of mistakes in a more long-term perspective when they have had more time to work on their written accuracy. Yvonne receives a lot of correction on determiners in her third and fourth essay, but shows no positive development in this area. What would her seventh and eighth essays look like?

Because of student attitudes towards correcting their mistakes, which resulted in few received revisions, and due to the short-term perspective, clear conclusions about the effects of correction and revisions are difficult to draw. Only one single student, Yvonne, hands in
all four assignments and all three revisions. Data from one person is not sufficient to draw any general conclusions. In this study it is nonetheless found that Yvonne, the only person who revises as requested, is also the student who shows the most positive development in terms of accuracy. I therefore argue that, although there is not enough data to draw any general conclusions, Yvonne’s rather exceptional development must be a result of correction in collaboration with revision. Thus, it may be also argued that the hypothesis that correction followed by revision might have positive effects on student written accuracy is supported rather than opposed by the results.

A more in-depth analysis consisting of more material and, above all, subjects who are willing to do everything required, could perhaps better illuminate the effects of correction and revision. It would perhaps also be interesting in such a study to have a control group consisting of students who receive error correction but are not asked to revise, in order to contrast the effects of correction alone and correction and revision. In the meantime, correction and revision should perhaps not simply be abandoned as suggested by Truscott (1996, 1999) since it might be helpful for students. Though this study is centred on university A-level students, the discussion and the findings might also be relevant for teachers and students at other levels where the pros and cons of error correction are debated, e.g. upper secondary schools.
References


Appendix

Diagram 18.

Error rate in all first drafts

Errors per 100 words

Yvonne, essay 1
essay 2
essay 3
essay 4

Caroline, essay 1
essay 2
essay 3
essay 4

Anna, essay 1
essay 2
essay 4

Lars, essay 1
essay 3