

## Selecting Errors for Selective Error Correction\*

John Truscott  
National Tsing Hua University

If one accepts the standard view that error correction in second language classes should be selective rather than comprehensive, the question naturally arises of how the selection process should be carried out. The paper explores this question by asking which types of errors are most likely to be eliminated or reduced by means of correction; in other words, which are most *correctable*. The focus is on (a) practical problems affecting the success of correction and (b) existing empirical work on the effectiveness of correction. The major conclusion is that the most correctable errors are those that involve simple problems in relatively discrete items. Least correctable are those stemming from problems in a complex system, particularly the syntactic system. Grammar errors in general are not good targets, though certain types can be identified that are more promising than others. These conclusions are developed in detail in the paper, with numerous examples.

Keywords: correctability, error correction, error type, selective correction

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, selective error correction has become a very popular and widespread practice. Its popularity is based on a number of well-known problems with the more traditional practice of comprehensive correction. For teachers, the latter can be extremely unpleasant and time-consuming, problems which are almost certain to result in a lower quality of correction. For students, the sea of red ink on their assignments is likely to prove quite discouraging, and even the most highly-motivated students cannot be expected to adequately deal with every error in their work. Partly for these reasons, standard thinking now is that correction must be used selectively.

This view naturally raises the question of how the selection process should be carried out. The standard answer is that it should be based on need—teachers should correct those errors that are especially important and/or which learners may have special difficulty overcoming on their own. This approach rests on the assumption that

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\* For helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, I would like to thank Nathan Jones, Johanna Katchen, and Yen-lung Shieh. This of course does not imply that they agree with everything I have to

correction is in general effective, that it is an all-purpose tool that can be used wherever the need is greatest. But research has produced considerable reason to believe that it is typically ineffective, at least where grammar is involved (Krashen 1992; Leki 1990; Truscott 1996, 1999; VanPatten 1986a, 1986b).<sup>1</sup> The implication is that the selection process should be based primarily on the possibility of success, rather than on perceived need. Correction is at best a very specialized tool, for which one must seek out the particular situations in which it is useful.

In seeking these situations, one must consider many variables, including the target language, the context (e.g., second language acquisition vs. foreign language acquisition), assorted learner variables (e.g., age and level), and error type. Also relevant are variations in the amount of correction, the time period involved, and the type of correction used (e.g., immediate vs. delayed, spoken vs. written, direct vs. indirect). An attempt to deal with all these complex variables would be an immense undertaking. I will therefore restrict my attention to one crucial factor—error type—and focus on the types that are characteristic of university-level English learners in Taiwan.

The issue is how promising correction is for each type of error—the *correctability* of that type. I will argue that the most correctable errors are those that involve simple problems in relatively discrete items. Least correctable are those stemming from problems in a complex system, particularly the syntactic system. To support and explain this position, I will examine correctability in terms of (a) practical problems involved in correction and (b) existing empirical work, and then look more briefly at two additional factors.

## **2. Correctability and practical problems**

One way correctability can be judged is by the extent of the practical problems involved in correcting each error type. For teachers, such problems include noticing and recognizing the targeted error with some consistency, understanding it, and clearly explaining it when necessary. None of these tasks can be taken for granted, especially

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say.

when dealing with the complexities of English grammar (Truscott 1996, 1999). Dealing properly with errors can be quite challenging even for English experts with native intuitions. For non-expert, non-native teachers, the problems are compounded. They are further compounded, in many cases, by the time pressures experienced by busy teachers. For learners, practical problems include understanding the error and the correction, applying this understanding to additional contexts beyond that in which the correction occurs, and maintaining their motivation to learn from the corrections.

All these factors suggest that relatively *simple* points are most suitable for correction. They can be most consistently identified and understood by teachers and learners and can be mastered without great efforts by students. Also valuable is *discreteness*, based on teachers' need to recognize an error type in a variety of contexts and to give explanations that are not bound to the error's original context, as well as on learners' need to generalize their learning. Discrete items are relatively easy to spot, independent of the context in which they appear. Words are probably the best examples—one can usually recognize a given word regardless of the context in which it appears. So an error associated with a particular word might be relatively easy to spot, and knowledge acquired from correction of that error might be relatively easy for learners to generalize.

An error's relative salience also affects the likelihood of teachers and students consistently identifying it. But determining relative salience is quite difficult, so I will deal with this variable only to the extent that it is implicit in discussions of discreteness.

In this section I will consider the implications of the simplicity factor in detail, examining its implications for the correctability of various error types. I will then look at the discreteness criterion more briefly, as it overlaps considerably with simplicity.

### 2.1 Simplicity

The simplicity criterion immediately raises doubts about correction of morphological errors. For inflectional morphology, the English forms are not very problematic in themselves, but major difficulties arise in their use. The choice of verb form for a given context is especially difficult. Use of noun inflections—plurals and

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<sup>1</sup> For a conflicting view of the research, see Ferris and Hedgcock (1998).

possessives—is much less difficult, but involves such complexities as the count-mass distinction and the alternation between prenominal modification and *of*-NP constructions (e.g., *a tennis match*, *\*a match of tennis*, *\*a tennis game*, *a game of tennis*, *the day's end*, *the end of the day*, *the city of Chicago*, *\*Chicago's city*). Each of these complications creates considerable difficulty for students. The simplest forms are probably comparatives and superlatives, but their use is by no means trivial.

The situation is similar for derivational morphology. Use of a given affix (e.g., attachment of *in-* to *considerate* but not to *wise*) is constrained by a variety of grammatical and semantic factors, with a substantial amount of historical accident mixed in. The process is further complicated by the existence, in some cases, of varying forms of the affix (allomorphs). Thus, the use of an affix is based on a relatively complex system, and is therefore not a good target for correction, based on the simplicity criterion.

For syntactic errors, the problems are even more serious. Syntax in general is complex and difficult, for learners and for teachers. The difficulty varies, and correctability might be influenced by such factors as the scope and reliability of individual rules (Doughty & Williams 1998). But few if any aspects of syntax appear to be very correctable. This point will be developed further below.

Lexical errors are perhaps the most interesting targets for correction. Based on the simplicity criterion, the least correctable errors are those for which correction would constitute an attempt to instill understanding of complex principles. Correction is more promising with those that do not depend on such principles, or when the principles are already understood and the goal is to help the learner apply them to individual words, especially to classify a word in one of a few known categories.

An example of the latter situation is the English count-mass distinction. It involves a number of interrelated agreement and co-occurrence restrictions, with a substantial (and often confusing) semantic base. Use of correction to teach the general distinction and its implications is not promising. But if the learner's interlanguage already has the general principles involved in the distinction, and learning means classifying an item in one of two existing categories (count noun vs. mass noun), the prospects are much

brighter. Errors like *\*garbages* might be correctable, if the learner already understands the count-mass distinction.

Some types of morphological errors can also be seen in these terms. Consider errors involving the English prefixes *in-* and *un-*. If the error represents a failure to grasp the general principles involved in the use of the affix—placing *un-* freely on nouns, for example—correction is not promising, based on the simplicity criterion. But if the learner already has a general grasp of how the principles are used but has misapplied them to specific words, then the situation is very similar to that just discussed, and correction may be appropriate. Errors such as *\*inwise* or *\*unconsiderate*, for example, might be correctable.

The same applies to inflectional morphology. I argued above that general principles are not good targets for correction, but again the forms of individual words provide better targets. Errors in irregular past tense forms (e.g., *\*arised*, *\*bited*) or plurals (e.g., *\*oxes*, *\*lifes*) may be correctable. Similarly, for confusion of *phenomenon* and *phenomena*, and other pairs of this sort, correction might be appropriate.

This discussion also suggests a way in which correction might be useful with some syntactic constructions. Dative alternation is an example. Some verbs allow both NP PP constructions (e.g., *give something to someone*) and double-object constructions (e.g., *give someone something*). The principles on which the possibility of the double-object construction is based are relatively complex. But once the learner has mastered the two structures, the fact that a given verb (e.g., *donate*, *contribute*) does not allow one of them is much simpler. Errors like *\*donate the hospital some money* might be relatively correctable. But whether such errors are really simple enough to satisfy the simplicity criterion is unclear.

Better candidates for correction are errors in specific combinations of words. Good examples are the use and non-use of prepositions. Learners often wrongly associate a preposition with a given word, as in *\*discuss about the problem* or *\*I will contact with you*. Other common mistakes involve failure to make a required association, as in *\*when we arrived that place* or *\*They don't care anything but money*. The third type of case is selection of a wrong preposition—*\*in exchange of these pictures* or *\*They are*

*curious to it*. In each case learning simply requires that a particular preposition be associated with—or dissociated from—another word; this appears to be a relatively simple task.

This discussion points to an important distinction between error types. Some involve learners combining a specific word with another specific word (e.g., *curious+to* vs. *curious+about*). Others involve the combination of a specific word with certain types of words/phrases (e.g., the type of phrase that can follow *donate*). Word+word combinations are much simpler than word+phrase type combinations, and therefore more correctable. This category also includes some inappropriate uses of *the*, as in *\*the Japan* or *\*the God*, and the use of words with very restricted collocations, such as *blond*. Idioms represent the extreme case of specific words combining with other specific words, so errors in the forms of idioms should be relatively correctable.

The use of correction to teach general principles of spelling, such as when double consonants appear, does not fare well on the simplicity criterion. But correction designed to teach the spelling of individual words might have more success. Similarly, teaching students to write *cannot* rather than *can not* is a very reasonable goal for correction. The same principle should apply to pronunciation. Unpromising, for example, are attempts to teach learners to distinguish tense and lax vowels (as in *sheep* vs. *ship*, or *paper* vs. *pepper*). But application of known principles to individual words ranks high on the simplicity criterion. Examples are identifying the stressed syllable(s) of a given word, or pointing out that the *b* in *thumb* is silent.

Semantically, the uses of a word can be quite complex and unintuitive. Native speakers' attempts to give definitions often resemble their efforts to explain grammar—they look at one or more acceptable examples of a word's use and try to infer a rule, with variable success. So attempts to correct semantic errors are often problematic.

But word meaning is quite variable in this respect. Many words reflect simple, intuitive concepts (e.g., numbers, common body-part names, days of the week). These words are also likely to closely correspond to L1 words, providing learners with additional help. Correction of semantic errors involving such words thus has some promise. Correction might also be used profitably to tell learners when a word they

have used may be offensive or is slang or formal. Also potentially correctable are errors involving confusion between two words with similar spelling and/or pronunciation, when the learner does not have trouble with either word in itself, only in remembering which has which meaning. Possible examples are *hobby-habit*, *taboo-tattoo*, and *except-accept*.

Co-occurrence restrictions are also closely tied to semantics, often adding to their complexity. Examples are *\*stole the bank* (compare *robbed the bank*) and the use of inappropriate objects with *assassinate*. Such cases are probably not highly correctable.

Some aspects of punctuation depend on complex grammatical principles. A learner who is not clear about sentence boundaries will have difficulty with end punctuation. One who does not have good intuitions for acceptable locations of pauses will have trouble with comma placement. These tasks, resting on a complex system, are not good candidates for correction. But if the principles have already been acquired and the learner simply needs to learn how aspects of punctuation fit with the system, the prospects are brighter.

Some aspects of punctuation are quite simple, because they do not depend on any complex system. Examples are the order in which punctuation marks appear when more than one is present (such as a period and a quotation mark) and the basic form of periods, question marks, and exclamation marks. Perhaps the most interesting mistakes of this sort involve Taiwanese learners' strong tendency to insert an inappropriate space before or after a punctuation mark (e.g., *my sister , who...*; or *He said " No "*). They are very simple and should be easy to correct (a conclusion strongly supported by my own experience).

This discussion must be taken with some caution, as judgements of simplicity are not always straightforward. In most cases the situation is clear enough to produce meaningful conclusions, but comparison with other criteria is essential.

## 2.2 Discreteness

The discreteness criterion has its own motivation—the need for teachers and learners to deal with a given item in a variety of contexts. A discrete item (such as a typical noun) can be identified and used in a new context more easily than one

inherently tied up with a system (such as a grammatical rule, or an aspect of such a rule). This observation is closely related to the distinction sometimes drawn between item learning and system learning (see Doughty & Williams 1998).

But in practice the implications of this criterion are nearly identical to those of the simplicity criterion. The role of discreteness was in fact implicit in the above discussion. Complex items are complex largely because of their involvement in systems; simple items are simple because they are not so intimately tied up with systems. The recurring distinction between applying known principles to individual cases and mastering the principles can also be seen as a distinction between discrete and non-discrete learning.

Perhaps the most interesting area for discussion of discreteness is the lexicon. Words are relatively discrete, making their recognition and generalization to additional contexts relatively easy. They are therefore appealing targets for correction. But, again, some aspects of lexis are intimately involved in complex systems, particularly in regard to semantics. This involvement removes the simplicity of the words, in the relevant aspects, bringing the discussion back to that of the previous section—correction is appealing only to the extent that the problem can be isolated from the associated system, or to the extent that the system has already been acquired.

The discreteness criterion has not led to any new conclusions about correctability. It does, however, strengthen the conclusions reached in the discussion of simplicity—the same assessments of correctability are now reached from two different directions.

### 2.3 Conclusion

Based on this discussion of practical problems, the least correctable errors are those that result from a failure to grasp a complex system, especially grammatical systems. Syntax in general offers little hope for correction, the most likely (or least unlikely) exceptions occurring in its interface with morphology (i.e., in aspects of inflectional morphology) and in combinations of specific words with other elements. For other areas, lexis in particular, when learning means mastering syntactic, semantic, or morphological systems, the prospects are poor. To the extent that the learning can be isolated from the underlying system, or the latter has already been acquired, it is among the most appealing areas for correction.



### 3. Empirical studies

To date no studies have produced good evidence that correction is effective (see Krashen 1992; Leki 1990; Truscott 1996, 1999; VanPatten 1986a, 1986b), so no evidence exists as to what error types are correctable. But there is evidence on which are *not* correctable. In terms of the discussion here, the major finding is that the errors that have been found uncorrectable in the research are mostly errors that also fail on the simplicity criterion.

#### 3.1 What error types have been found uncorrectable?

Verb forms are the most frequently studied target of correction (Cohen & Robbins 1976; DeKeyser 1993; Lightbown 1983; Plann 1977; Polio et al. 1998; Sheppard 1992) and also played a major role in work on comprehensive correction (Hendrickson 1981; Kepner 1991; Robb et al. 1986; Semke 1984). The results of these studies were overwhelmingly negative. Doughty and Varela (1998) obtained positive results for correction of English past tense forms in oral contexts, but the proper interpretation of these results is very much open to question (Truscott 1999).

Altogether, research on correction of verb forms provides considerable reason for skepticism. This conclusion might be extended, with less confidence, to inflections in general (Lightbown 1983; Plann 1977). These findings therefore confirm the judgments based on the simplicity criterion—errors of this sort were identified above as complex and therefore probably not correctable.

For other targets evidence of ineffectiveness is more limited. Robb et al. (1986) included lexical errors and style, but they did not specify exactly what the errors were, so it is difficult to relate these findings to the simplicity and discreteness criteria. Ellis (1984) studied English *wh*-questions; the failure of the study to obtain significant results might be attributed to the complexity of the construction (but see below). Plann (1977) looked at articles, which are discrete but again clearly fail in terms of simplicity.

Some caution is required in the interpretation of these findings. A great many factors other than error type could influence the effectiveness of correction. Only a few of these studies, for instance, looked at EFL students in Asian universities. The research findings clearly do provide meaningful evidence regarding correctability, but

they should not be seen as conclusive in themselves; they must be used in conjunction with other criteria.

### 3.2 What types have not been found uncorrectable?

No error types have been shown to be correctable, so one might take the opposite approach and ask which have not been found uncorrectable; in other words, which have not been included in the studies that found correction ineffective.

Little has been done with the constructions/rules of traditional transformational grammar, such as *wh*-questions, passives, clefts, yes-no questions, tag questions, pseudoclefts, relative clauses, datives, topicalization, coordination, negation, ellipsis, and *tough* movement. Ellis (1984) found no effect for English *wh*-questions, but his study was very short term. Other constructions have not been specifically targeted at all, though they probably played a significant role in studies of comprehensive correction. Thus there is little empirical evidence regarding my tentative conclusion that errors of this sort are not correctable, based on the simplicity and discreteness criteria.

Also open is the more promising area of lexical errors, including word meaning, pronunciation, spelling, and co-occurrence restrictions, along with derivational morphology. Studies of comprehensive correction included such errors, but did not separate them from other types, much less examine the individual types of lexical errors. Robb et al. (1986) included lexical factors but apparently did not distinguish the various types.

Many more specific types might be added. Examples are pronoun features, placement of adverbs, use and non-use of articles and copulas, and various aspects of punctuation and reference styles.

## 4. Some additional factors

### 4.1 Developmental sequences

Good evidence exists that much of grammar is acquired in more or less predictable sequences, and that efforts to teach things out of sequence are misguided (for reviews, see Ellis 1994; Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991; and the more recent work of Bardovi-Harlig 1997, Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds 1995). The existence of the sequences thus

imposes important constraints on the prospects for correction—aspects of grammar for which a learner is not yet ready are not good candidates for correction. Identifying and respecting the current stage for individual learners is impractical (see, for example, Ellis 1993), so teachers cannot be expected to base their corrections on their students' readiness for specific constructions. For this reason, errors that are related to developmental sequences are not good targets for correction. Errors not related to any known order of acquisition are more promising.

One effect of this criterion is to classify as uncorrectable much of what is commonly included in studies of grammar. The constructions of traditional transformational grammar are precisely the kinds of items that have been found to develop in standard patterns. Examples are negation, relative clause structure, and basic word order. The same is true of many aspects of inflectional morphology.

On the bright side, this criterion points once more to words as likely targets for correction. They do not appear to be involved in developmental sequences, except for the use of some function words, such as negatives and auxiliary verbs, and the role of verb classes in tense learning (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds 1995). Nearly all aspects of lexis fare well on this criterion, as do the other non-grammar error types considered above.

#### 4.2 Universal grammar

If one assumes a Universal Grammar (UG) view of second language acquisition, another approach to correctability suggests itself. On this view, acquisition is controlled to a large extent by the innate principles that make up UG. The extent of the control can be related to the correctability of the various error types, as noted (in somewhat different terms) by Schwartz (1993). The more tightly an element is controlled by UG, the less amenable it should be to alteration through explicit or negative information (correction). This rules out most syntactic phenomena, which in this approach are either a direct reflection of UG or are tightly constrained by it.

Given this approach, lexical factors are among the best candidates for correction, as noted by Schwartz (1993) and Sharwood Smith (1993). Words themselves, varying almost arbitrarily across languages, are not closely connected to UG. The same

considerations apply to language-specific inflectional morphology, such as verb forms (Schwartz 1993). Both appear to be relatively correctable, by this criterion.

For some aspects of language, UG has little or no part. These are the best candidates for correction. They include, most clearly, aspects of writing systems such as the form of individual letters, numbers, and punctuation marks, spelling conventions, idiosyncratic spellings, indentation, centering, spacing, and reference styles.

## **5. Putting the factors together: Which errors are most correctable?**

Each of the criteria used here has its limitations, as noted above. However, when several independent factors all point to very similar conclusions, as is the case here, those conclusions should be taken seriously. In this section I will briefly summarize the major findings of this investigation.

### **5.1 Lor-correctability errors**

Syntactic errors in general make poor targets for correction. They are typically not simple or discrete, are often involved in developmental sequences, and tend to be intimately associated with UG.

The same is true of errors involving inflectional morphology. This pessimistic conclusion also receives support from empirical studies mentioned above, especially those involving the use of verb forms. The most likely exceptions, for English, are comparative and superlative forms. The situation is similar for derivational morphology, at least in regard to its general principles.

### **5.2 Moderately correctable errors**

All these forms of grammar correction are most promising with the type of error that results from misapplication of known principles to an identifiable individual case, usually a word. Such errors include misclassification of words (e.g., treatment of a mass noun as a count noun); attachment of an inappropriate derivational affix to a word; and use of a given construction, such as dative, with inappropriate words.

In comparison to those considered above, these errors are simpler and more discrete (as they are tied to individual words), and appear to have less involvement in developmental sequences. There is also little empirical evidence against their

correctability. On the other hand, in each of these cases treating the error as relatively correctable means assuming that the learner has already mastered the relevant general principles. Determining the extent to which this is true in any given case can be difficult, and some of these principles are quite complex. So these error types probably have only a moderate, and variable, level of correctability. Those involving the simplest principles are most promising.

### 5.3. Relatively high-correctability errors

Higher on the correctability scale are lexical errors less tied to general principles. These include misspelling or mispronunciation of isolated words; simple errors in a word's meaning; the forms of idioms and other very restricted collocations; mistaken association of a particular preposition with a particular other word, or failure to make such an association when necessary; use of *the* before words that do not allow it; confusion of two words with similar spelling and/or pronunciation; and mistakes based on a lack of awareness that a particular word is vulgar, slang, or formal.

To this list of relatively correctable errors can be added some simple points not directly related to grammar or lexis. These include errors in writing a given letter, number, or punctuation mark, indenting the beginning of a paragraph, centering titles and section headings, simple aspects of punctuation (and perhaps more difficult aspects after the necessary grasp of grammar has been achieved), and possibly reference styles.

Each of these error types fares well on all the criteria considered here, as each involves problems in relatively simple, readily identifiable items. These are the errors that teachers and learners can most easily recognize, understand, and apply to new contexts. In general, they do not seem to be involved in developmental sequences, and are the least tied to UG. Finally, there is little empirical evidence suggesting that correction is not effective with these mistakes.

## 6. Conclusion

Based mainly on practical and empirical considerations, I have suggested that certain types of errors are more correctable than others and are therefore more appropriate targets for selective correction. Caution is required, as certain crucial

questions lie outside the scope of this investigation. In particular, I have not shown that any given error type can be successfully corrected, just that correction is *relatively* promising with certain types. Nor can one conclude from this discussion that any actual benefits that result from correction would be worth the time and effort involved or would not be outweighed by harmful side effects, such as inhibition and negative attitudes toward learning. Whether correction is actually effective and appropriate with even the more promising error types must be judged by future research and by teachers' own classroom observations. My hope is that this article can contribute to these efforts.

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**About the Author:** John Truscott is Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at National Tsing Hua University. His research interests include the effectiveness of grammar instruction and correction and the implications of research in linguistics and cognitive psychology for second language learning and instruction. His related publications include “The Case against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes,” *Language Learning* 46 (1996): 327-65; “Noticing in Second Language Acquisition: A Critical Review,” *Second Language Research* 14 (1998): 103-35; “The Case for ‘The Case against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes’: A Response to Ferris,” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 8 (1999): 111-22; “What’s Wrong with Oral Grammar Correction,” *Canadian Modern Language Review* 55 (1999): 437-56; and “Unconscious Second Language Acquisition: Alive and Well,” *Studies in English Literature and Linguistics* 25 (1999): 115-31. [E-mail: [truscott@mx.nthu.edu.tw](mailto:truscott@mx.nthu.edu.tw)]

[Received 22 February 2001;  
revision received 10 May 2001;  
accepted 17 May 2001]