



# Correction and Self-Correction of Written Assignments at Tertiary Level

Galina Kavali auski ene

[Law University of Lithuania](#), Vilnius, Lithuania

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## Abstract

Learning a foreign language is a step-by-step process, during which mistakes are to be expected in all stages of learning. Fear of making mistakes prevents learners from being receptive and responsive. Overcoming fear of mistakes depends on the way mistakes are rectified.

The contemporary emphasis on learner-centeredness and autonomy suggests that in some settings learner's self-correction of mistakes might be more beneficial for language learning than teacher's correction. This assumption has neither been confirmed nor disproved in the relevant literature.

This paper addresses learners' perceptions of teacher's correction and learners' self-correction. The findings give some insights into the role of correction and self-correction in mitigating learner fear of mistakes and facilitating process of learning by developing language awareness.

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## Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a gradual process, during which mistakes are to be expected in all stages of learning. Mistakes will not disappear simply because they have been pointed out to the learner, contrary to what some language learners and teachers believe.

Language acquisition does not happen unless the learner is relaxed and keen on learning. Fear of making mistakes prevents learners from being receptive and responsive. In order to overcome learners' fear it is essential to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in language classrooms, to encourage cooperation through peer work or small group work and apply techniques for language acquisition that suit and involve individual learners.

Another aspect of overcoming fear of mistakes is the way mistakes can be remedied. Majority of EFL teachers assume an active role in error rectification, while learners prefer being passive and rely on teachers to point out their mistakes. In the long run, this approach is neither efficient nor efficacious, particularly in treating the so-called 'fossilized' errors.

The contemporary emphasis on learner-centeredness and autonomy suggests that in some settings learner's self-correction of errors might be more beneficial for language learning than teacher's correction. This assumption has neither been confirmed nor disproved in the relevant literature.

The aim of this paper is to report the research data on learners' perceptions of teacher's correction and learner (peer) self-correction of written assignments. The findings give some insights into the role of correction and self-correction in mitigating or even eradicating learner fear of mistakes, facilitating process of learning by developing language awareness and encouraging learner autonomy in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

## Literature review: Correction vs. Self-correction

It has already been mentioned that making mistakes is a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of cognition. Mistakes that occur in the process of learning a foreign language are caused either by the interference of the mother tongue or developmental reasons, and are part of the students' interlanguage (Harmer, 2001:99).

Mistakes are often a sign of learning and, as a result, must be viewed positively. Teachers have to recognize a well known fact that 'learnability varies from person to person' and 'all language learning is based on continual exposure, hypothesizing and, even with the correct hypothesis, testing and reinforcing the ideas behind them' (Bartram & Walton, 1991:97).

An updated theory on errors, corrective feedback and classroom practice in spoken language is described by Ancker (2000:20), who claims that 'error correction remains one of the most contentious and misunderstood issues in the second and foreign language teaching profession'. A survey to the question 'Should teachers correct every error students make when using English?' covers responses from teachers, teacher trainees and students in 15 countries. 25% (out of 802) of teachers and 76% (out of 143) of students support this viewpoint, while 75% of teachers and 24% of students, respectively, are against such correction. Interestingly, 'the most frequent reason for not wanting correction was the negative impact on students' confidence and motivation, and the most frequent reason for wanting correction was the importance of learning to speak English correctly' (Ancker, 2000:22). Among the causes for errors, apart from the above-mentioned L1 interference, an incomplete knowledge of the target language, language complexity and error fossilization are mentioned. It is also pointed out that teacher's correction does not always work. Students often correct each other, which is very important because 'self-correction or peer correction help to focus student attention on errors and to reduce reliance on the teacher, thereby encouraging student autonomy' (Ancker, 2000:23).

There are many factors to consider when, what and how to correct. Correction of oral performance is carried out differently than correction of written work. Whatever kind of error rectification a teachers conducts s/he must remember Michael Lewis's message 'You never correct a mistake, you always correct a person' (quoted in Bartram & Walton, 1991:93). Moreover, there are three reasons why the active involvement of students in the process of dealing with mistakes is important: it stimulates active learning, induces cooperative atmosphere, and develops independent learners (Bartram & Walton, 1991:81).

In his book *Mistakes and Correction*, Julian Edge (1989:20) says that teachers 'have to be sure that they are using correction positively to support learning' (quoted in Ancker, 2000:20). According to Jeremy Harmer (<http://www.eltforum.com/forum>), 'correction is a very subtle matter. Gentle re-formulation is often useful, when the student has a chance of correcting himself in passing. The best time to correct is as late as possible'. Moreover, 'teachers have the problem of 'dominating students', and therefore such correction can be counter-productive. Correction is done appropriately if it is supportive, offers insights and does not interrupt language learning / acquiring opportunities'.

EFL practitioners agree that error correction is an essential condition for successful acquisition of any language, although they are at variance on ways of conducting it. Reconciliation of viewpoints might be secured by turning to self-correction. The prevailing opinion among some practitioners is that the primary teachers' task in initiating self-correction in written work is to indicate the mistakes, but not correct them. The indication can be performed either by underlining errors or coding them (T for a wrong tense, SP for a wrong spelling, WO for a wrong word order).

Learners must be given practice in self-correction of their own work either individually or in pairs but only if they prefer peer cooperation. However, in my opinion, students definitely need training in rectifying mistakes independently, i.e. without teacher's interference. Left to their own devices learners might be overwhelmed or frustrated by task intricacy. Learner's ability to notice errors without teacher's aid is a qualitative leap to conscious cognition.

At the end of error self-correction activity, teacher's feedback is crucial and must be performed in a way to have a long-term positive effect on students' ability to monitor their own performance (Bartram & Walton, 1991:95).

To the best of my knowledge, there is not much research on learners' perceptions on self- / peer-correction. In the latest research paper, only 36% of learners would not mind having their written work corrected by peers, while a vast majority of 64% are against peer-correction. As far as self-correction is concerned, 28% of respondents would not mind correcting their own work, while 72% would mind rectifying their own mistakes (Stapa, 2003).

Language difficulties perceived by students on a tertiary level and causing concern include grammar and vocabulary (Kavaliauskiene, 2003). Grammar mistakes and inadequate vocabulary aggravate the quality of students' written work and oral presentations. Generally speaking, self-correction of written work is easier for students than self-correction of oral presentations, because the former is less threatening to learners and the latter requires note-taking due to shorter memory spans of retaining utterances.

## Research Data and Discussion

The outset of data collection on correction and self-correction goes back to 1999 and has lasted up to now. The long-term goals of this research are to find effective means for mitigating or even eradicating learners' fear of mistakes and mistakes themselves.

Each year there were groups of students who responded to teacher's questionnaires or surveys. It must be emphasized that inquiry was always anonymous, which allows us to assume that data are impartial. Inasmuch as the findings on interrelated assessment and self-assessment have already been published elsewhere (Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene, 2002:324), and the relevant to self-assessment issue of correction and self-correction has only been touched upon briefly, it is worthwhile to present here only the recently obtained data.

There were 43 respondents to the poll on correction and self-correction. The respondents were the day-time second-year students at the Law University of Lithuania, who had had 110 hours of ESP instruction so far. It has been of interest to find out students' general views on teachers' correction (which they were used to at school) and novel experience of self-correction of written and oral work (which students have encountered for the first time on a tertiary level).

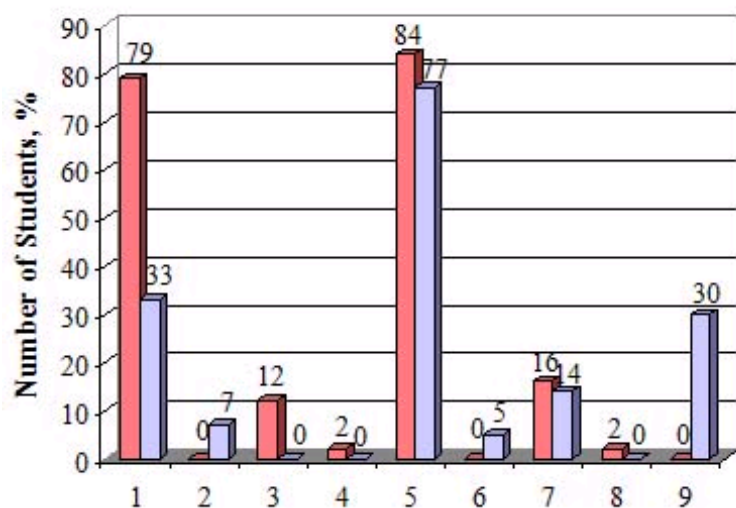
The content of the recent student questionnaire was limited to the points posed by Jeremy Harmer in his [Correction Survey](http://www.eltforum.com/forum) (<http://www.eltforum.com/forum>) and expressed views on how to correct available at the same website.

The respondents usually wrote their assignments in class. The assignments included compositions, summaries, grammar and vocabulary tests. Teacher checked written assignments and ticked each repairable line in the margins of individual work. After the written assignments were returned to the students, they performed the task of self-correction in class either individually or in pairs, in accordance with their preferences. Teacher's role consisted of providing assistance (if/when needed) and feedback at the end of each self-correction session. At some stages of remedial work a few learners asked for teacher's guidance, but on the whole a majority were content with working on their own.

The presented information on respondents' attitudes to teacher's correction during the semester and learner/peer self-correction was gathered after the latest self-correction session by administering

a short questionnaire.

### Teacher's Correction vs Learners' Self-Correction



The questionnaire contained two major statements with multiple choice suggestions:

o Teacher's correction of oral / written work is:

- a) necessary b) unnecessary c) pleasant d) unpleasant e) effective f) ineffective
- g) implies teacher's domination h) offends & de-motivates students.

o Learner's (peer's) self-correction of oral / written work is:

- a) necessary b) unnecessary c) effective d) ineffective e) implies learner's independence
- f) undermines teacher's domination.

The findings are depicted in the bar chart below. The bar chart shows comparison of learners' attitudes to teacher's correction vs. learners' self-correction. The first bar depicts respondents' views on teacher's correction, and the second bar - on self-correction.

The interpretation of numbers on the horizontal axis is described below. Correction or self-correction is:

- 1 - necessary, 2 - unnecessary, 3 - pleasant, 4 - unpleasant, 5 - effective, 6 - ineffective,
- 7 - implies teacher's domination vs. undermines teacher's domination, 8 - offends & de-motivates students vs. offends teacher, 9 - implies teacher's vs. learner's independence.

Surprisingly, only the third of respondents (33%) support the view that self-correction is necessary against over three fourths of respondents (79%) who back teacher's correction (number 1 on the horizontal axis).

Teacher's correction is thought to be effective by 84% of learners, and 77% of respondents agree on the effectiveness of self-correction, with only 7% difference (the 5th bars).

These two findings shown by the 1st and 5th bars are somewhat contradictory - fewer learners think self-correction is necessary than support its effectiveness.

Almost the third of respondents (30%) think that self-correction implies learners' independence (9th bar). 16% believe that correction implies teacher's domination, and 14% - that self-correction undermines teacher's domination (7th bar).

None of the learners think that teacher's correction is unnecessary or ineffective (2nd and 6th

columns), while negative attitude to self-correction was expressed by some students: 7% think it is unnecessary, and 5% - ineffective. Moreover, one student marked teacher's correction unpleasant, demotivating and offending, which makes 2% (8th column).

In our previous research on verbal correction as many as 88% of respondents wanted to be corrected by teacher or peers. However, only 44% of respondents wanted to be corrected immediately, and 44% - later, while the rest 12% - in private (Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene, 2002).

Interviews with learners have been of primary importance in elucidating individual attitudes. In the weekly counselling sessions, about half of the learners claimed that correcting errors in pairs helped them identify mistakes easier, develop a more positive attitude towards mistakes and, to some extent, overcome fear of making mistakes in the future. Another interesting point that learners mention is their increasing awareness of how language works, which helps eradicate common errors.

Students say they expect and want to have their mistakes corrected by teacher, but agree that it is hard to get rid of the habit of making the same mistake over and over again because of the earlier formed stereotypes. Some students say they are afraid of being laughed at or offended if teacher corrects their work / performance in class and comments on it. This opinion is in accordance with Harmer's views (<http://www.elforum.com/forum>), who remarks that none of the respondents want to see any written harsh comments. It also concurs with the notion that 'written annotations on student paper generally fail to improve student writing' Leki (1994:63).

None of the respondents like having their work graded either. This finding coincides with the standpoint described by Leki (1994:62): 'if there is a grade on a paper, students read the grade and simply discard the paper, often in disgust at the injustice of receiving a low mark'. Thus, the main concern that learners have in common is the grade they receive.

Another interesting finding is that the respondents stated their performance would be better, if they were not afraid of being graded. Some of the learners proposed a motion for teacher to administer more non-graded assignments. Apparently, the fear of mistakes is virtually a fear of getting a poor grade and losing face.

In my opinion, it is not a bad idea to stop writing a grade on the written assignment. Such practice might encourage some learners to do better in the future and would not discourage them from perfecting language skills. For teachers, it is sufficient to make a note on learner's performance in their notebooks or register. Eventually, what is of superior importance in language learning is progress and efforts that learner makes, and the outcome is never immediate, although receptive and responsive learners learn faster.

## Conclusions

The data obtained in this research show that:

- o 79% of respondents claim that teacher's correction is necessary and 84% think it is effective;
- o 33% of learners agree that self-correction is necessary and 77% - that it is effective;
- o 30% of students agree that self-correction implies their independence;
- o developing language awareness is an important outcome of self-correction;
- o fear of making errors is rather upheld by fear of being graded and/or downgraded.

## About the Author

Galina Kavaliauskiene is Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages at the Law University of Lithuania.

Email: [gkaval@tu.lt](mailto:gkaval@tu.lt)

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