Learners’ Attitudes towards Error Correction in EFL writing

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Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti

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Summary

In education, corrective feedback is viewed as crucial for motivating learners and helping their learning. A growing body of research on corrective feedback in EFL points to its importance for the process of language acquisition. This paper presents the results of a survey of 100 high-school EFL writers' perceptions about error correction. The aim is to investigate learners' attitudes towards error correction in EFL writing classes in relation to the subjects' gender and proficiency. The responses show that EFL learners generally have a positive attitude towards error correction. Learners believe that, in order to improve writing skill, it is necessary to receive teacher's correction of their written work. Furthermore, significantly more female learners show higher preference for error correction. Finally, more proficient learners have a more positive attitude towards error correction.

Key terms: corrective feedback, error correction, attitudes, EFL

Sažetak

U obrazovanju, povratna informacija nastavnika o uspješnosti učenika važna je za podizanje učeničke motivacije i pomoć pri učenju. Mnogobrojna istraživanja o povratnim informacijama o uspješnosti učenika u odnosu na učenje engleskog kao stranog jezika ukazuje na njihovu važnost u procesu ovladavanja jezikom. Ovaj rad predstavlja rezultate istraživanja na uzorku od 100 srednjoškolskih učenika i njihove percepcije kada je riječ o ispravljanju pogrešaka. Svrha je ovog rada istražiti stavove učenika prema ispravljanju pogrešaka na satovima pisanog izražavanja u odnosu na spol i poznavanje engleskog kao stranog jezika. Rezultati pokazuju da učenici engleskog kao stranog jezika imaju pozitivan stav prema ispravku pogrešaka. Učenici smatraju da je za poboljšanje vještine pisanja nužno od nastavnika dobiti ispravak pogrešaka vlastitog pisanog rada. Nadalje, rezultati ukazuju na statistički značajne razlike između učenica i učenika, pri čemu učenice daju veću prednost ispravljanju pogrešaka nego dječaci. Konačno, statistički značajne razlike postoje i između uspješnijih i manje uspješnih učenika, pri čemu učenici koji bolje vladaju engleskim jezikom imaju pozitivniji stav prema ispravku pogrešaka od učenika koji slabije vladaju engleskim jezikom.

Temeljni pojmovi: povratna reakcija na pogreške, ispravljanje pogrešaka, stavovi, engleski kao strani jezik

1. Introduction

Mistakes and errors are an inevitable side effect of all learning, and yet so much learning time is spent denying or correcting them. There has always been much concern and discussion on errors and error correction in second (L2) and foreign language (FL) learning and teaching, therefore, studies on error correction have become a target of many researchers whose main goal is to investigate the role of error correction in language learning.

A growing body of research on corrective feedback in FL and L2 points to its importance for the process of language acquisition. However, numerous experts, researchers, and teachers share conflicting opinions on error correction and its effect on learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Ferris (1999, as cited in Truscott, 1999) asserts that no one should argue for the abandonment of error correction, and even gives a myriad of reasons for error correction in classroom. According to Corder (1973), language is not a question of acquiring a set of automatic habits, but a learner's process of discovering the underlying rules, categories, and systems of choice in the language presented to him or her by the teacher. Subsequently, many teachers provide corrective feedback in order to correct learners' mistakes and errors in language usage and to help them benefit from making those mistakes and errors. For this reason, the teacher's role seems to be crucial in corrective feedback.

However, there is little evidence that language acquisition comes from being corrected. Truscott (1996) asserts that error correction is actually harmful to learners and that focusing only on the incorrect and correcting every error discourages learners from taking risks in language learning.

Since it is considered normal that EFL writers make errors, one of teachers' main aims should be to find out what learners think about error correction and its influence on their language learning. Teachers should pay attention to learners' attitudes and opinions in order to sustain learners' motivation and improve their results by making them aware of their errors. Teachers and learners should communicate clearly in order to find out what kind of approach to error correction benefits learners and their language acquisition the most. According to Ellis (as cited in Zhu, 2010), the most significant contribution of error analysis lies in its success in changing the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to language learning. In this sense, researchers view errors as evidence of the learner's positive contribution to foreign language learning rather than as a sign of learner's inability to master the new language, as many teachers view it. Therefore, error correction is considered one of the most important aspects of learning and teaching foreign language writing that needs further research.

The purpose of this study is twofold: to investigate how learners perceive error correction and how they react to their teacher's error-correction practice, to explore whether there is a difference in attitudes between male and female learners, as well as more proficient and less proficient learners.

It is often believed that female learners show more eagerness to learn, and that learners with higher language proficiency express remarkably more positive attitudes towards learning. Therefore, the hypothesis is that, if the attitude towards error correction is significantly driven by gender and language proficiency, then the female learners, as well as more proficient learners will perceive error correction as valuable to their language learning.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Writing skill and corrective feedback

It may be stated, with perfect confidence, that the invention and evolution of writing influenced the progress and evolution of the human race. Without any doubt, writing is the most important invention in human history because it provides a record of information, beliefs, feelings, arguments, opinions, theories, ideas, etc. Writing allows us to objectify ideas and write them down; it enables us to communicate with our contemporaries, but also to leave a mark and communicate with future generations.

The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill, it is learned and practiced. Therefore, writing is notably significant in today's educational system. Therefore, integrating writing into both EFL and ESL writing classes is essential. According to Janet Emig (1977:123), writing represents a unique mode of learning because "it originates a verbal construct that is graphically recorded". It is well known that writing helps learners deepen their knowledge because it extends learners' engagement in the learning process.

Writing skill is an important tool for learners because it is the primary basis upon which their work, learning, and intellect are judged and graded. Writing makes learners' opinions and knowledge visible and expresses who they are. If learners do not know how to express themselves in writing, they will not be able to communicate well with teachers, peers, etc. By the same token, while having good writing skills is considered crucial for today's learners because it helps others give them feedback on their writing, it is common for learners to dislike and avoid the writing process, since, as Caroll (1990:1) remarks, learners are criticized and taught not to focus on their successes, but failures.

Zacharias (2007:38) emphasizes the importance of recognizing writing as a skill that contributes to language learning. Therefore, writing is a skill that requires students to be highly motivated. Since learners make mistakes often, especially learners writing in a foreign language, Zacharias (2007:39) explains that plenty of time is devoted to corrective feedback, which is a part of most writing courses. According to Russel and Spada (2006, as cited in Evans et al., 2010:48), the term 'corrective feedback' in language learning refers to any feedback provided to a learner, from any source, that contains evidence of learner error of language form.

2.2. Mistakes and errors

In order to discuss corrective feedback and error correction in the next chapters, a distinction between mistakes and errors must be made. In linguistics, the definitions of terms ‘mistake’ and ‘error’ are rather diverse, even though the term 'error' is often assumed to incorporate the notion of a 'mistake'. Furthermore, Catalan (1997:62) asserts that, in the field of Psycholinguistics, mistakes in writing are the result of a wrong functioning of the neuromuscular commands of the brain. According to Brown (1987), a mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a ‘slip’, in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. Obviously, mistakes do not result from the learner's lack of knowledge. Equally important, Brown (1987) clarifies that when attention is called to a mistake, they can be self-corrected. Also, according to Lennon (1999, as cited in Maicusi, et al., 2000), an error is a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production would not be produced by the speakers’ native counterparts. In addition, Corder (1999, as cited in Tafani, 2009) explains that errors reflect gaps in learners’ knowledge and that they occur because the learner does not know what is correct and what is not. For the same reason, second language (L2) errors are considered "unwanted forms" (George, 1972, as cited in Maicusi, et al., 2000) and are regarded as something negative which must be avoided by any means. Lastly, Brown (1987) argues that, even if they are pointed out to the learner, errors cannot be self-corrected.

2.3. The importance of corrective feedback in language learning

Mackey (2006) asserts that feedback has been considered crucial for L2 acquisition. According to Hashemnezhad and Mohammadnejad (2012) Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is a standard method used by most teachers to provide guidance in revising students writing. Presently, there is a growing body of research that suggests the benefits of WCF for the development of learners’ accuracy. Researchers have strong but opposing views on whether feedback is beneficial to learning, questioning its value and efficacy in classroom. Consequently, as Conrad and Goldstein (1999) argue, writing teachers devote quite a lot of time and effort to commenting on learners’ papers. However, it is certainly not an easy task since teachers are often held responsible for their learners’ writing performance (Lee, 2011:9). According to Sampson (2012), errors in speech are fleeting and often being ignored by interlocutors for the sake of comfortable and fluent interaction, whereas errors in written work are more permanent, and can create a negative effect on the reader. Foreign language learners are often insecure and vulnerable because they are taught not to see their own mistakes as valuable assets which can

help their language accuracy, but as dark clouds hanging above them and their grades. While it is unlikely that feedback alone is responsible for language improvement over a complete course, Ferris (2002, as cited in Hyland, 2003) asserts that it is a highly important factor. Furthermore, Probst's study (as cited in Hyland and Hyland, 2006) claims that from an interactionist perspective it is regarded as a crucial means of establishing the importance of reader responses in shaping meanings. Therefore, the teacher's role in corrective feedback seems to be of vital importance.

2.4. The role of the teacher

It is believed that the role of the teacher is to assist students and to provide the, students with the information and tools they need in order to learn. Teachers have become more aware of the roles they play as readers of their learners' written texts. Ferris (2004) emphasizes the importance of error feedback by teachers in L2 writing classes. At the same time, providing error feedback in writing classes is a difficult and time-consuming task. However, as Ferris et al. (1997:155) assert, it allows for a level of individualized attention and one-on-one communication that is rarely possible in the day-to-day operations of a class, and therefore plays an important role in motivating and encouraging students. Although correcting errors might seem like a daunting task, many teachers feel obligated to correct their learners' compositions simply in order to justify the grade the learners have been given. Hodgecock and Lefkowitz (1996:288) assert that teachers as evaluators fulfill the administrative and pedagogical function of assigning a grade, "but may simultaneously attempt to provide feedback—an objective that may operate at cross-purposes with the evaluative goal". However, K. Hyland and F. Hyland (2001) emphasize that, while responding to learners' writing in an important element of the teacher's role, it is a practice that carries potential dangers. Presently, teachers believe that in order to be a good teacher, one must correct their learners religiously: "it is likely that writing teachers are influenced by the 'more is better' maxim, thinking that the more errors they respond to, the more responsible teachers they are" (Lee, 2013:113). Semke (1984) points out that a traditional assumption has been that written work in foreign language classes must be corrected meticulously. Without doubt, every teacher will have different views on error correction and different ways of correcting their students. Unfortunately, most EFL teachers do not seem to realize the threats of their unmindful corrective practice. Goring Kepner (1991) emphasizes that many teachers fear the 'fossilization' of errors and feel morally obligated to correct all mistakes in student written work. However, it is important for teachers to be reminded that language learning does not happen overnight: "teachers must not lose sight of the fact that second

language acquisition is slow, gradual, and often arduous, and that corrective feedback is only one of the many ways that contribute to that process" (Guenette, 2007:52). Evidently, learning does not happen in the mind of the teacher, but in the mind of the learner. For the same reason, Zamel (1985:96) claims that teachers should not act as authorities, but act as consultants, assistants, and facilitators. Since teachers have the power to build up or tear down a learner's self-esteem and motivation for writing, they should use their power carefully in order to guide learners and help them overcome barriers to a second language acquisition. Greenhalgh (1992, as cited in Reid, 1994:272) claims that a teacher must make it possible for learners to take control of their own writing by helping them identify and solve their problems without appropriating the draft. Therefore, today's teachers should teach learners to be self-directed, but they should also strive to learn continuously from their learners. It is not clear whether or not teachers' hard work pays off because, as Lee (2011) points out, learners continue to make the same mistakes, become more and more reliant on the teacher, impeding their own progress and improvement. Working together with learners towards their success should be every teacher's main goal. Therefore, teachers should "look to make comments that play back their reading of the text, offer praise, ask questions, and provide guidance, explanations, and instruction" (Daiker, 1989; Elbow & Belanoff, 1989; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984; Moxley, 1989; Straub 1995b, Straub & Lunsford 1995, as cited in Straub, 1997:93).

2.5. Direct and indirect corrective feedback

Error correction can be operationalized in terms of direct and indirect feedback:

Assuming that WCF is effective in helping learners improve the accuracy of their writing and in facilitating the acquisition process, a range of studies have investigated whether certain types of WCF or combinations of different types are more effective than others. These studies have most often categorized feedback as either direct (explicit) or indirect (implicit) (Bitchener and Knoch, 2009:198).

One of the constant debates among researchers is whether or not teachers should give their learners direct or indirect feedback on their written errors: "a substantial amount of teacher research is concerned with error correction, such as the types and extent of error feedback and their effects on student accuracy. The only problem with direct feedback might be the fact that it does not engage and challenge learners; therefore, it may not contribute to language acquisition. Ferris(1999, as cited in Lee, 2008) and Frodesen (1991, as cited in Lee, 2008) assert that direct feedback is used when teachers feel the error in question is complex and beyond students' ability to self-correct.

On the other hand, MacKey (2008) explains that it is believed that indirect corrective feedback promotes learner autonomy so teachers assume that indirect feedback should always be used since it requires learners to monitor their own errors and to try to fix the errors on their own. Furthermore, Ellis (2010, as cited in Lee, 2013) states that indirect WCF is able to allow greater cognitive engagement.

2.6. Types of corrective feedback

Teacher feedback is the most common feedback, but Saito (1994) states that there are many ways of providing feedback in both L1 and L2 situations: teacher correction (with comments), error identification, commentary, teacher-student conference, peer correction, and self-correction. In this chapter, three main types of error correction will be discussed: teacher correction, peer correction, and self-correction.

Firstly, teacher correction is frequently practiced by EFL teachers. Zacharias (2007) remarks that teachers are considered more competent in terms of language and knowledge, and are therefore, considered more experienced in writing and providing feedback. However, Lee (2008:195) opines that even though learners think that their teacher's feedback serves mainly to inform them of their errors, they do not realize the significance it has for their writing. However, learners seem to value teacher correction greatly, therefore, it is still considered crucial in the classroom.

Secondly, since correcting written compositions can be time-consuming, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to read and correct all the learners' written works. "Peer tutoring approach is mainly based on Vygotsky's (1918, as cited in Dekhinet, 2008:410) theory where competent learners scaffold weaker ones and help their progression through the zone of proximal development. Peer correction allows a learner's colleagues to assess the individual's performance. It can, therefore, be a good way to engage learners and encourage them to read their peers' written compositions, provide comments and point out the mistakes. Unquestionably, this classroom technique where learners correct each other, rather than the teacher doing this has become greatly popular. Numerous practical benefits of peer response for L2 writers have been suggested by Ferris (2003:70):

1. Students gain confidence, perspective, and critical thinking skills from being able to read texts by peers on similar tasks.
2. Students get more feedback on their writing than they could get from the teacher alone.
3. Students get feedback from a more diverse audience bringing multiple perspectives.

4. Students receive feedback from non-expert readers on ways in which their texts are unclear as to ideas and language.
5. Peer review activities build a sense of classroom activity.

Witbeck (1976, as cited in Saito, 1994) argues that peer correction results in learners' greater concern for achieving accuracy in written expression and creates a better classroom atmosphere for teaching the correctional aspects of composition. Similarly, Hansen and Liu (2005, as cited in Lundstrom & Baker, 2008) emphasize that peer correction enhances learners' perception of the written work and gives them the chance to practice English in a meaningful context while offering a "meaningful interaction with peers, a greater exposure to ideas, and new perspectives on the writing process". Equally important, Hyland and Hyland (2006:90) assert that peer feedback is seen as a way of giving more control to learners since it allows them to make active decisions about whether or not to use their peers' comments as opposed to a passive reliance on teachers' feedback. Hyland (2000:35) asserts that peer feedback may make learners less reliant on teacher feedback by helping them to internalize an audience and a checklist of evaluative questions to apply to their writing. Therefore, it may be assumed that peer correction makes learners feel like they are in charge of their language acquisition, instead of blindly following their teachers' written feedback. Undeniably, creating opportunities for learners to provide constructive, specific feedback, and responding to their peers' written compositions, changes learners' perspective on mistakes and errors, and helps them become responsible and autonomous learners. Above all, that is the greatest gift teachers can give to their learners; the opportunity to take charge of their own learning.

On the other side, Sultana (2009:12-13) presents some of the problems with peer correction:

1. Some students might feel reluctant to correct their friends' errors because correcting friends' errors might harm their relationship.
2. Jeremy Harmer (2004) anticipates a possible problem with peer correction. The student, after getting corrected by a peer, might feel that s/he is inferior to his peers.
3. Students might feel reluctant about giving their work to their peers for correction because they do not want their classmates to know about their errors
4. Sometimes students do not value their peers' knowledge, and therefore they do not want to revise their own written works based on their friends' feedback. (Macdonca & Johnson, 1992).

"Though many ESL writing teachers have jumped on the peer response bandwagon over the past 15 years, some have quickly jumped back off, fearing not only that peer feedback was ineffective for L2 writers ("the blind leading the blind") but that students were uncomfortable

with it for a variety of reasons" (Ferris, 2003:108). Without reservation, peer correction can make learners feel ill-equipped to undertake the assessment and correct their peers' written compositions. They may be reluctant to make judgements regarding their peers' writing. Sultana (2009) argues that the peer correction fails when learners do not view their peers as authorities who could correct their errors. Finally, Ferris (2003:70) concludes that researchers, teachers and student writers themselves have identified potential and actual problems with peer response: writers do not know what to look for in their peers' writing, the comments are too harsh or complimentary, and the peer feedback activities take up too much classroom time.

Thirdly, self-correction technique encourages ESL and EFL learners to correct any mistakes they have made in their written compositions on their own. This makes the correction more difficult, but also more significant for the learners, as they correct their mistakes for themselves. Makino (1993:338) asserts that self-correction is believed to encourage learner involvement and responsibility while activating their linguistic competence. That way, the teacher encourages learners to accept responsibility for their writing. Since learners need to correct their own mistakes, they become less reliant on the teacher, which in turn helps language acquisition. Above all, self-correction encourages independence from the teacher and gives the student more motivation and confidence. On the downside, students may not understand how to self-correct or be clear on the correct model. This could lead to even more errors and the reinforcement of existing errors. Finally, Semke (1984: 202) argues that self-correction is the least effective approach in terms of both achievement and attitudes when compared to the other types of error feedback.

As has been noted, even though teacher correction is the main feedback activity, peer correction and self-correction can be used successfully in classroom in order to enhance learners' writing practice. Witbeck (1976, as cited in Saito, 1994:65) emphasizes that if learners knew how important peer correction and self-correction are, they would be able to cope with errors without depending on a teacher.

2.7. Error correction

As described in previous chapters, mistakes are a crucial element of all learning and teachers' perceptions of mistakes and errors are profoundly important in an educational environment as they can influence learners' perceptions of errors. However, attitudes towards error correction in a foreign language differ greatly. In the SLA literature, support for correction can be found in strands of theory such as Swain's (1985, as cited in Sampson, 2012) *output hypothesis*, which supports correction and argues that when learners receive direct metalinguistic feedback on their output, it is used to confirm or disconfirm rules of form, which helps

acquisition. However, Maicusi et al. (2000) claim that the error is often considered an obstacle to language learning. For this reason, Krashen (as cited in Zhu, 2010) argues that the learning of a foreign language may be discouraged by the teacher who insists upon correction and grammatical accuracy so it can raise the learners' level of anxiety. Also, Littlewood (1984) suggests that overcorrecting is harmful because one form or pattern may be overemphasized or overpracticed, so that the learner produces it in inappropriate contexts. Although that may be true, many experts support error correction and suggest that it is a valuable practice in foreign language writing process.

2.7.1. Truscott's approach to error correction

Truscott (1996:529) defines error correction as correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of improving a student ability to write accurately and argues that the researchers have paid insufficient attention to the side effects of grammar correction, such as its effect on students' attitudes, or the way it absorbs time and energy in writing classes. Therefore, he suggests that grammar correction in L2 writing classes should be abandoned because the researches show it to be ineffective and indicate that it has harmful effects. In his article, Truscott (1996) expresses a strong disapproval of error correction and any positive effect a written feedback given by language teachers to their learners may have. Likewise, he concludes by advising all language teachers to abandon any type of correction in writing courses. Truscott (1996, as cited in Bitchener et al., 2005:192) also opines that, on the one hand, error correction, as it is typically practiced, overlooks SLA insights about the gradual and complex process of acquiring the forms and structures of a second language. For this reason, Truscott (1996) outlines a range of practical problems related to the ability and willingness of teachers to give and learners to receive error correction. He sees no benefit in error correction and strongly supports a correction-free approach. Presently, it is believed that teacher expectations about their learners' abilities can influence learners' expectations, which would mean that learners do not have the chance to express their attitudes and preferences towards error correction and learning in general. Consequently, Truscott's article (1996) sparked a debate among experts and researchers. "In response to Truscott (1996), Ferris (1999) has offered some reasons for continuing to give error correction" (Ashwell, 2000:228). In her rebuttal to Truscott's article, Ferris (1996) asserts that learners want and expect correction, and that it should not be ignored. Furthermore, in her recent research, Ferris (2004:59-60) points to positive evidence from various lines of research that offer support for error correction and rebuts Truscott's critical view of error correction by suggesting that teachers prepare themselves to do error correction competently, plan for it carefully in

designing courses, and execute it faithfully and consistently. Also, Ferris (2008) claims that Truscott acknowledges that learners do want error correction but says that their preference is no argument for giving it to them and agrees that learners should not be the sole judges of what is best for them. Equally important, she emphasizes that teachers must balance learner preferences with their own time and energy limitations. Accordingly, Ferris (2004:58-59) asserts that teacher engagement as well as further research are necessary:

When the research base is inadequate—as it is in in most areas of applied linguistics/TESOL/L2 composition—we clearly cannot afford to stop teaching and wait for the researchers to tell us how it should be done. So we must, in the meantime, rely on the research evidence that does exist, our own experience and intuitions, and the desires of our students to inform and guide us, but at the same time remain humble and avoid rigidity, knowing that, as a research and teaching community, we are still shaping the knowledge and discourse of our discipline.

2.7.2.1.The red pen effect

For years, red pens have been used for error-marking in classroom. Presently, it is still the practice of many EFL and ESL teachers to correct their learners' written compositions with red pens. Lee (2008:193) asserts that the newer research suggests that the use of red ink by teachers to correct learners' written compositions may be discouraging and harmful. Bandura (1986, as cited in Zacharias, 2007:46) claims that such practice might lower student self-efficacy and prevent them from learning from the feedback. Certainly, as Storch and Wigglesworth (2010, as cited in Lee, 2013) clarify it, papers inundated with red ink are likely to hurt learners' egos and damage their confidence in writing, affecting the uptake of feedback as a result. Lee (2013:113) criticizes teachers for continuing to scrawl detailed comments on learners' compositions and doing what seems efficient to them, but is demotivating and disconcerting for learners. Likewise, Semke (1984:195) strongly asserts that corrective feedback results in learners' disappointment and discouragement.

3. Exploring learners' attitudes towards error correction

Since the dawn of time, learners have been taught that mistakes and errors are a clear indication that they are not good enough or smart enough. Hyland (1998) points out that writing is a personal activity and that learners' motivation and self-confidence as writers is affected by the feedback they receive. In order to get the best of error feedback it is crucial to investigate how learners perceive it and whether they believe their written work can benefit from it. To put it another way, learners' perceptions of themselves as writers are shaped by their experiences in writing classes. Generally speaking, most learners are not confident in their English-writing skills because, as Kasper and Petrello (1996:178) assert, learners have been conditioned to expect failure, so they have difficulty writing and tend to evaluate themselves as they write, which is a habit that only aggravates anxiety and inhibits the generation of ideas.

Since many teachers do not see errors as a valuable tool for learning, learners tend to be ashamed of their errors in the learning process. In order for both experts and teachers to see how valuable error feedback is, learners need to express their attitudes towards error correction practice. Durst (1990, as cited in Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1996) confirms that here has been almost no work done on students' attitudes and approaches to writing assessment. However, a variety of recent studies have begun to look at L2 writing and learners' attitudes towards error correction provided by teachers. On the negative side, as Sampson (2012:495) asserts that error correction does not stimulate learners to think that their communicative competence is sufficient for conveying most meanings in most situations, so they may feel little motivation to eliminate errors. Indeed, "the more assistance the teacher offers, the less responsibility the student needs to take" (Reid, 1994:287). As a matter of fact, Lee (2004:302) states that learners may even stop taking responsibility for their own writing thinking that it is the teachers' job to correct errors. Ferris (1999b, as cited in Ferris, 2003:28) argues that error correction models poor priorities about the process of writing, that it does not help student writers and may even mislead them. Furthermore, Zamel (1985:79) argues that teachers' marks and comments often take the form of abstract and vague prescriptions and directives that students find difficult to interpret. Similarly, Sommers (1982, as cited in Zamel, 1985) emphasizes that teachers' comments take learners' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus their attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting, which cannot be beneficial to learners. Consequently, Kasper and Petrello (1996:179) assert that writing teachers should aim to decrease student anxiety if they wish to encourage learners' language acquisition. Nevertheless, many researchers suggest that error correction can be beneficial to learners. Hendrickson (1978) believes that

errors produced by second language learners improve their foreign language proficiency more so than if their errors would remain uncorrected. For the most part, learners are responsible for their own learning. Therefore, there is an obvious need to understand their views of teacher corrective feedback. As already mentioned, teachers do find correcting learners' papers exhausting, but they do "have strong feelings about response to student writing and wonder about the efficacy and value of their own response mechanisms" (Ferris et al., 2011:207). However, numerous studies examining learners' perceptions of feedback have shown that learners do have strong opinions on both the amount and type of feedback given by their teachers and want their written works to be corrected because they believe error correction is helpful.

Questions what learners' opinions of error correction are and whether they want their written compositions to be corrected pose themselves. Hyland (1998) emphasizes that learners value feedback for its potential role in language development. However, Ping et al. (2003, as cited in Montgomery and Baker, 2007) argue that there is often a mismatch between the feedback that students want or expect and the feedback that is actually given. As a result, it may be asserted that learners respect their teachers' opinions and appreciate their efforts and attention.

Teachers should pay attention to what kinds of comments they make and try to foresee how they will be received by learners. Predictably, as Semke (1984:201) emphasizes, positive comments seem to be the most appreciated by learners. Also, Cardelle and Corno (1981, as cited in Saito, 1994) suggest that positive comments along with specific comments on errors may be an effective way to motivate students to improve their writing. Subsequently, it raises the question whether too much of a good thing can be harmful to learners' EFL acquisition. Rubin (2002, as cited in Treglia, 2009) defines mitigation as a form of politeness intended to buffer and mediate the emotional involvement and possible sense of inadequacy related to receiving critical response to one's writing. On the one hand, as Hyland and Hyland (2001:207) assert, through mitigation and the expression of praise, criticism or suggestion, teachers can confuse their learners. On the other hand, some researchers (Lea & Street; Weaver, 2000; 2006, as cited in Treglia, 2009) believe that mitigation improves the confidence of students and encourages them to be responsible for their writing. Consequently, since every learner is unique, some learners may value positive comments very highly, while other learners may simply put off or ignore them because believe that they are the result of mitigation. Therefore, since mitigation can prevent learners from understanding the error seriousness, it can compromise learners' language acquisition. In order to prevent miscommunication, Hyland (1998:280) emphasizes the importance of teachers and learners working together towards a common goal. Likewise, Reid

(1994) emphasizes that teachers should act as responsible readers who help learners identify and solve writing problems without inadvertently commandeering their written compositions. Moreover, Leki (1991, as cited in Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1996) suggests that teacher error feedback may need to be modified in order to address the learners' educational needs and expectations. For the same reason, Hyland (1998:279) emphasizes that it can be difficult for teachers to provide feedback that will cater to learners' expectations because each learner has a unique perception of error correction. Furthermore, Moffett (1994 as cited in Jacobs et al., 1998) highlights the need for teachers to be consultants who, while encouraging and guiding learners to use peer and self-directed feedback, stand ready to intervene with the necessary support. Finally, as Hyland and Hyland (2006) assert, attempts have been made to find out more about learners' attitudes towards teacher corrective feedback, mainly through questionnaire surveys which show that learners greatly value teacher feedback and consistently rate it more highly than alternative forms such as peer feedback and oral feedback. Despite the complications that may arise due to corrective feedback, it is believed that learners mostly think that frequent error correction does improve the language they are learning.

4. Exploring learners' attitudes towards error correction in writing

4.1. Aim of this study

The present study explores how learners of different gender and proficiency feel about corrective feedback and what their preferences are. It investigates learners' opinions and attitudes towards error correction, how they believe it impacts their confidence, motivation and learning. This aim of this study is to explore learners' attitudes towards teacher feedback. The assumption is, similar to that of some other previously mentioned studies (e.g. Ferris 2004; Hyland 1998; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz 1994; Ferris & Roberts 2001; Lee 2004), that learners will express their request for teacher error correction. The assumption is that learners will feel motivated and confident after receiving error correction. In addition, the assumption is that learners will express their respect and appreciation for teacher correction. Also, the assumption is that learners will express their beliefs in the importance of error correction for language acquisition. Furthermore, the assumption is that learners will express the opinion that teacher written response should play a central role in error correction practice. Predictably, it may be assumed that learners will treat peer correction as helpful, but will express discontent with self-correction. Further, the assumption is that learners will find the red pen demotivating and unnecessary. The assumption is that there will be difference in attitudes between 'more successful' and 'less successful' learners. That assumption may be justified by the fact that the more proficient learners do not feel anxious before receiving a feedback or demotivated after receiving a feedback. Another important assumption is that there may be difference in male and female learners' attitudes. The expectation is that female learners will show more appreciation for error correction and will find it more helpful, as opposed to male learners who, due to the character of their gender, will find error correction stressful and demotivating. In brief, the research questions are:

1. How do learners perceive error correction and its effect on their language acquisition?
2. How do learners react to error correction?
3. Is there a difference in attitudes between male and female learners?
4. Is there a difference in attitudes between more proficient and less proficient learners?

4.2. Participants

Data for the study were gathered from 100 high-school EFL learners. There were 52 female and 48 male participants. A questionnaire of learners' perceptions of error correction in

EFL writing (see Appendix) was completed by learners of English in Second Grammar School in Osijek, in four different fourth grade classes taught by the same teacher, therefore, the attitudes of the participants are comparable. The participants had been learning English for 10 years in average. D

Table 1 shows the level of learners' proficiency was analyzed in terms of their average grades in English. Excellent and very good learners are considered as highly proficient. The following is the distribution of learners in the sample according to their proficiency: there were 9 learners whose grade was 'sufficient', followed by 31 learners whose grade was 'good', 30 'very good' learners, and 30 'excellent learners'. There were no students whose grade was 'insufficient'.

Table 1. *The number of participants according to proficiency*

	N	Min	Max	Mean	St. D.
Average grade in English	100	2	5	3.81	.971

4.3. Instrument

In order to investigate learners' opinions and attitudes towards error correction in EFL writing, Questionnaire 1 (see Appendix), designed by the researcher, was distributed to learners. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions and each item was followed by a three-point Likert scale: *1- Never, 2- Sometimes, 3- Always.*

The following statements were included in the questionnaire: 1. It is important to me to have as few errors as possible in my written work; 2. I want to receive corrective feedback when I make mistakes; 3. I feel motivated to improve my knowledge when my attention is drawn to my errors; 4. If my teacher focuses on marking a certain type of mistake, I can remember it better; 5. My teacher underlines grammar mistakes; 6. Being corrected constantly motivates me; 7. If the teacher circles all my errors it encourages and motivates me, 8. After my teacher has corrected my errors, I make the same errors again; 9. Teacher's correction helps me make progress in grammatical accuracy in writing; 10. After the correction, I try to avoid the errors I had made; 11. I prefer my teacher to use a red pen when correcting my composition; 12. The teacher should correct students' errors; 13. The classmates should correct students' errors; 14. Learners' themselves should correct their mistakes; 15. The teacher always makes positive comments on my written work; 16. The teacher always makes positive comments on my written work.

In order to avoid possible language problems, the questionnaire was translated into Croatian. It minimized possible confusions and enabled learners to understand what was meant by a particular item. After several reliability analyses, 9 items were deleted for greater instrument's reliability (as measured by Cronbach's alpha), leaving only 7 items concerning learners' attitudes towards error correction. This increased the Cronbach's alpha from .525 to .719.

4.4. Procedure

The data collection took place in February and March 2014. The learners were given a questionnaire in their regular classes by the researcher. The questionnaire was anonymous in order to encourage learners' honesty. Furthermore, in order to motivate learners to give honest answers to the questions, the author has undertaken certain measures to keep their answers confidential; the author explained to learners that their answers would not be available to their teacher. After carefully reading the instructions, the respondents filled in the questionnaire. The procedure lasted for about 15 minutes. The obtained data was statistically processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

4.5. Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive results for learners' attitude towards error correction and answers the first and second research questions regarding learners' perceptions of and reactions to error correction.

Table 2: Learners' perception of and reaction to error correction

Item	Min	Max	Mean	St.D.	Mode
It is important to me to have as few errors as possible in my written work.	1	3	2.75	.458	3
I want to receive corrective feedback when I make mistakes.	1	3	2.64	.560	3
I feel motivated to improve my knowledge when my attention is drawn to my errors.	1	3	2.35	.642	2
If my teacher focuses on marking a certain type of mistake, I can remember it better.	1	3	2.51	.628	3
Being corrected constantly motivates me.	1	3	1.96	.665	2
Teacher's correction helps me make progress in grammatical accuracy in writing.	1	3	2.48	.577	3
After the correction, I try to avoid the errors I had made.	1	3	2.71	.556	3

Table 2 reveals that learners are accustomed to teacher error correction and want to receive it since they believe that being corrected leads to linguistic development. The high mean value clearly shows that learners have a positive attitude towards error correction and its effect on their language acquisition. Furthermore, learners believe that being corrected makes them avoid making the same errors they had made and, most importantly, enables them to learn from their own errors.

The third research question was whether there was a difference in attitudes between male and female learners. To explore whether there were any differences between female and male learners and in order to answer the research question, an independent-samples t-test was run.

Table 3: Independent-samples t-test (gender and attitude towards error correction)

Item	Gender	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
It is important to me to have as few errors as possible in my written work.	M	2.60	.54	-3.14	75.91	.002**
	F	2.88	.32			
I want to receive corrective feedback when I make mistakes.	M	2.42	.61	-4.07	81.66	.000**
	F	2.85	.42			
I feel motivated to improve my knowledge when my attention is drawn to my errors.	M	2.21	.65	-2.16	95.07	.033*
	F	2.48	.61			
If my teacher focuses on marking a certain type of mistake, I can remember it better.	M	2.48	.62	-.470	97.79	.639
	F	2.54	.64			
Being corrected constantly motivates me.	M	2.00	.72	.576	93.52	.566
	F	1.92	.62			
Teacher's correction helps me make progress in grammatical accuracy in writing.	M	2.46	.58	-.359	97.23	.720
	F	2.50	.58			
After the correction, I try to avoid the errors I had made.	M	2.58	.65	-2.20	80.81	.028**
	F	2.83	.43			

According to table 3, there is a statistically significant difference between female and male learners' attitudes towards error correction. Significantly more female learners than male learners perceive having as few errors as possible in their written compositions as extremely important. Moreover, significantly more female learners than male learners want to receive corrective feedback. Furthermore, significantly more female learners than male learners perceive

error correction as having motivational value. Finally, significantly more female learners than male learners try to avoid the errors they had made.

The fourth research question was whether there is a difference in attitudes between more proficient and less proficient learners. For the purpose of analysis, the learners whose English grades are 5 (‘excellent’) and 4 (‘very good’) were considered to be more proficient (>=4) (a total of 60), and the learners whose grades are 3 (‘good’) and 2 (‘sufficient’) were considered to be less proficient (<4) (a total of 40). In order to answer the fourth research question regarding attitudes of more proficient and less proficient learners, an independent-samples t-test was run. The results are presented in table 4.

Table 4: Independent-samples t-test (proficiency and attitude towards error correction)

Item	Grade	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
It is important to me to have as few errors as possible in my written work.	>=4	2.85	.40	2.653	71.88	.007**
	<4	2.60	.50			
I want to receive corrective feedback when I make mistakes.	>=4	2.72	.56	1.693	83.84	.094
	<4	2.53	.55			
I feel motivated to improve my knowledge when my attention is drawn to my errors.	>=4	2.38	.64	.634	82.99	.527
	<4	2.30	.65			
If my teacher focuses on marking a certain type of mistake, I can remember it better.	>=4	2.48	.65	-.518	88.53	.605
	<4	2.55	.60			
Being corrected constantly motivates me.	>=4	1.95	.68	-.183	85.01	.855
	<4	1.98	.66			
Teacher's correction helps me make progress in grammatical accuracy in writing.	>=4	2.40	.62	-1.715	94.44	.0.90
	<4	2.60	.50			
After the correction, I try to avoid the errors I had made.	>=4	2.75	.57	.880	87.58	.381
	<4	2.65	.53			

As Table 4 shows, a significant difference was only found between more proficient and less proficient learners' in their perceptions of the importance of error correction. Significantly more 'more proficient' learners than 'less proficient learners' find it important to have as few errors as possible. Furthermore, 'more proficient' learners than 'less proficient' learners want to receive corrective feedback on their written compositions.

5. Discussion

The results of this study provide the answers to research questions and support the hypothesis that both gender and language proficiency greatly influence learners' perceptions of and attitudes towards error correction.

The results suggest that learners want to have their written compositions corrected by the teacher because they have a positive attitude towards error correction and its effect on their language acquisition and believe that error correction assists their learning. This coincides with results found in the previously mentioned researches by other researchers (e.g. Hedgcock & Lefkowitz 1994; F. Hyland 1998; Ferris & Roberts 2001; Lee 2004) who claim that learners expect being corrected and believe that error correction is beneficial in language development.

The attitude towards error correction is influenced by gender. The results show that female learners show higher preference for error correction. This might be because female learners are generally considered to be more motivated to learn than male learners. Also, female learners tend to get better grades than male learners do. As a result, female learners might be more self-confident and therefore, more interested in learning than male learners.

The attitude towards error correction is influenced by language proficiency. The results indicate that highly proficient learners have a more positive attitude towards error correction. The results coincide with the results in the research by Lee (2008b) who asserts that the learners of lower proficiency are less interested in error feedback than those of higher proficiency. This might mean that highly proficient learners do not make as many errors as less proficient learners do. More proficient learners might be more comfortable with error correction, and therefore, more confident in their own writing. Also, more proficient learners might understand the positive effect that error correction has on their writing. On the other hand, less proficient learners might feel anxious when writing in English. Error correction might discourage less proficient learners in taking risks in foreign language learning and might make them more anxious about receiving error correction since it draws attention to their weaknesses.

The respondents represent a sample of high school students. Therefore, the results of the research could be generalized to the extent that other students are similar to the respondents. However, a limited number of respondents might raise a question of the reliability of the findings and require further and wider study into the issue because even though learners themselves think positively of error correction and appreciate it, the real importance and contribution of such feedback is still unclear for numerous teachers and learners.

Although the paper is inevitably limited in scope, it is hoped it will serve as motivation for further discussion on what can be done to bridge the gap between learners and the teachers' error correction practices. The findings of this study lead to implications for future research.

Since the objective of this study was to explore learners' attitudes to error correction, it is hoped that the information from this study may be of pedagogic importance to teachers of English because it is a matter of great relevance to teachers to find out what the current learners' beliefs and opinions on error correction are, what works for them, and how the teachers should treat learners' errors in order to motivate them. Therefore, this study could serve as a motivation to teachers to modify their error correction practice in order to make it more meaningful and influential. Although this study does not investigate a causal link between error correction and language acquisition, it does suggest that learners pay attention to it and believe it helps them in language acquisition. This study leads to suggestions for improving teacher feedback and helping students utilize it more effectively. One recommendation is research that addresses the learners' and teachers' preferences for particular correction methods. Another recommendation is research that investigates the effect of teacher attitudes on the feedback given, as well as learners' attitudes on language acquisition. Finally, there is clearly a need for research that not only compares the effects of receiving corrective feedback and no corrective feedback, but also examines the long-term effects of error correction in EFL writing.

Studies like this help teachers stay aware of what their learners may think and how they might react to their error correction practices. Active student participation and engagement in corrective practice is necessary in the EFL writing, as well as teacher education for those teachers who believe that their feedback practice does not need to evolve as their learners grow as writers. In the meantime, it is important for teachers to create and maintain an environment that encourages learners to take chances in their writing and learning.

6. Conclusion

Corrective feedback is important in EFL teaching and learning. There are numerous studies that investigate error correction methods since implementing error correction properly can be challenging even for experienced teachers. Active student participation and engagement in corrective practice is necessary in the EFL writing. However, very little is known about what actually happens in the classroom and in learners when teachers respond to errors in their writing. Katayama (as cited in Hamouda, 2011) asserts that what has been neglected in studies that pay attention to error feedback are the preferences and attitudes of the learners and teachers towards error correction and its influence on learning.

This study did not intend to provide definitive answers but rather to investigate learners' attitudes in order to suggest some preliminary findings which may help further research. Although the sample size was not adequate for this particular study, a study that analyzes attitudes of a larger sample size would be required to validate these findings that are going to be mentioned later in this chapter. However, the data that has been analyzed makes it possible to make some general conclusions about learners' attitudes towards error correction in EFL writing. Even though this study does not investigate the link between error correction and language acquisition, it does suggest that learners pay attention to it and believe it helps them in language acquisition. This study shows that EFL writing learners generally react positively to error feedback, take error correction seriously, and pay a lot attention to it. Teacher corrective feedback might be a big investment of time and energy for teachers, but it is clear that students highly appreciate and want it.

Due to several weaknesses in the research design, the results can, of course, only be regarded as tentative. The small sample size is an obvious reason for treating the following results with some skepticism. The following conclusions have been drawn from the study. First, learners believe that in order to improve writing skills, it is necessary to receive teacher's correction of their written work. Second, gender slightly influences learners' attitudes to error correction. Significantly more female learners than male learners perceive having as few errors as possible in their written compositions as important and motivating, therefore female learners show higher preference for error correction. Third, learners' proficiency influences their attitudes towards error correction; learners with higher grades have a more positive attitude towards error correction.

The results show that accuracy in writing (as few errors as possible) is essential to EFL learners. Learners report positive feelings towards teacher feedback, as well as other corrective

methods. Similarly, learners find teacher feedback most beneficial to their language acquisition as they expect to improve their writing and learn more when their teachers highlight their errors and correct them. However, some learners prefer peer correction or self-correction since correcting errors alone or collaboratively is surely more motivating for learners than copying correct forms provided by the teacher. On the whole, the learners agree that they find error correction useful and motivating. Many of them believe that the teacher is the one who should correct written errors. Learners report positive feelings towards teacher feedback and show that they value the opportunity to share the responsibility for language acquisition with teachers and peers. In conclusion, even though some students express some concerns about the mechanics of the error correction, such as red pen, they generally feel it is beneficial for their writing and language acquisition.

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Appendix: Research Questionnaire

1. SPOL

   M Ž

2. GODINE _____

3. ŠKOLA _____

4. Koliko dugo učite engleski jezik?

   1 godinu 2-5 godina 6-9 godina više od 10 godina

5. Koja je Vaša ocjena iz engleskog jezika?

   1 2 3 4 5

Molim Vas da zaokružite odgovor koji se odnosi na Vas. Zaokružite samo jedan odgovor.

1- NIKADA 2 –PONEKAD 3- UVIJEK

1. Važno mi je da imam što manje pogrešaka u pisanju na engleskom jeziku.	1 2 3
2. Želim da me nastavnik/nastavnica ispravi kada pogriješim.	1 2 3
3. Motivira me da poboljšam svoje znanje kada mi netko ukaže na moje pogreške.	1 2 3
4. Ako se moj(a) nastavnik/nastavnica usredotoči na ispravljanje određenog tipa pogreške, lakše pamtim.	1 2 3
5. Moj(a) nastavnik/nastavnica podcrtava gramatičke pogreške.	1 2 3
6. Motivira me kada me nastavnica stalno ispravlja.	1 2 3
7. Ako nastavnica zaokruži ili podcrta sve moje pogreške, to me obeshrabri i čini me nervoznim.	1 2 3
8. Nakon što moja nastavnica ispravi moje pogreške, opet učinim istu pogreške.	1 2 3
9. Ispravci pogrešaka pomažu mi napredovati u gramatičkoj točnosti pri pisanju.	1 2 3
10. Nakon ispravka, trudim se izbjegavati prethodne pogreške.	1 2 3
11. Preferiram kada nastavnica koristi crvenu kemijsku olovku za ispravljanje pogrešaka.	1 2 3
12. Nastavnik/nastavnica treba ispravljati učeničke pogreške.	1 2 3
13. Kolege u razredu trebaju ispravljati učeničke pogreške.	1 2 3
14. Učenici sami trebaju ispravljati svoje pogreške.	1 2 3
15. Nastavnik/nastavnica uvijek ima pozitivne komentare na moj pisani rad.	
16. Sviđa mi se kako moji pismeni uradci budu ispravljeni.	1 2 3