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Correcting Written Work in EFL Classes: Case of First Year Students at Tlemcen University

Rim BELKHERROUBI[1], Wassila BOUKLIKHA GRAIA[2]

[1] Tlemcen University, Algeria, rim.belkherroubi@univ-tlemcen.dz

[2] Tlemcen University, Algeria, wassila.graia@univ-tlemcen.dz

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Abstract ;(not more than 10 Lines)

This article presents an Error Analysis (EA) undertaken at the level of first-year EFL students at Tlemcen University. A comparison is made between the number of errors produced in students' writing before correction and those made by the same students after correction. This research aims to find out if correction has an impact on students' writing. The first part presents an overview of EA and error correction, before moving to the second part, which deals with the procedure followed by the researcher during his study. Finally, a summary of the main results found during this comparison is presented. They confirmed the researcher's hypothesis, which means that correction is effective mainly in tackling students' spelling errors in writing.

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1. *Introduction*

Writing is one of the most critical skills in foreign language learning as learners are required to turn their input into output and produce a piece of writing in a different language from their mother tongue. They do not only have to convey meaning, but they also need to verify that their written production is based on the rules that inspire the target language both in terms of register and check the suitability and correctness of the language used. They also need to use their mind to be creative in another language and capture their target audiences' attention. Correcting learners' written work can be one of the most complicated and challenging tasks of the teacher as he or she must be certain that students will gain something positive beyond comments without feeling afraid and discouraged after those corrections.

Corresponding author: Rim BELKHERROUBI

This paper presents a case study that aims to investigate the effectiveness of correction in writing. In this sense, an analysis devoted to the correction of essays written in English by first-year Algerian EFL students at Tlemcen University. The research attempts to answer the question, "Does correction have a positive impact on students' writings?" confirming or invalidating the following hypothesis: correction could be an effective way to tackle students' errors since learners make errors because of their ignorance of the correct form.

2. *Literature Review*

Learner errors have long been regarded negatively and considered as a sign of failure because, as Corder (1973) said, they are "breaches of the code" (p.252). However, nowadays and since the 1980s, errors are seen as a means used to assess students' knowledge of the target language. This evaluation is made through an Error Analysis (EA) which is a process based on the identification, classification and interpretation of errors produced by a foreign language learner (Crystal, 2008). Moreover, as stated by Agustinasari et al. (2022), "Error Analysis helps teachers to get deeper into their students' difficulties, and to be able to describe them" (pp. 254–255). In other words, EA is used to identify the problems faced by the learners and to shed some light on the possible causes of their errors. This means that making use of EA helps the teacher, on the one hand, to find out the problems faced by his learners, and on the other hand, to find the appropriate remedial techniques to overcome those problems (Lengo, 1995).

Correction is one of the possible means used to tackle errors, but it is still a source of contradictions between teachers: some of them are against correction considering that it is a loss of time, while others think that every error should be corrected in order to avoid reinforcement of bad habits in the learner. These two positions are considered as being too extremist and the best way to deal with errors is to be somewhere in between, because as stated by Abdulrahmane and Alshumaimeri (2015), "…error correction is beneficial in helping students to enhance their language skills." (p.134), i.e., the role of correction is to help learners and improve learning since according to Murphy (1986), correction is "a form of feedback to learners on their use of the language" (p. 146). The different points of view about correction may leave the teacher at a loss: Should s/he correct errors or not?

3. *Procedure*

For the selection of the corpus, a sample of written work was collected from ten students who were provided with the topic "My last summer holidays" and were asked to write about 150 words without a time limit, i.e., they were asked to hand in their papers whenever they finished. All of them were first-year students in the Department of English of Tlemcen University (Algeria), aged

between eighteen and twenty-one. All came from state-run schools and had almost the same language learning background. Their mother tongue is Algerian Arabic, while Standard Arabic is the first language. On the one hand, they have learned French, as a first foreign language (FL_1), for nine years from the primary school (more precisely from the 4th year) upwards; on the other hand, they learned English as a second foreign language (FL_2) only for five years in middle schools and lycées. At that time, English was taught using the communicative language teaching approach which is defined by Hubbard (1996) as being the teaching of language for a purpose. In this sense, they say that:

> If communicative teaching is teaching language for a purpose, then the sense of purpose needs to play a prominent part in the process of presentation and practice. Instead of teaching forms with their meanings and then going on to practise their uses, we might begin with the use and proceed to teach examples of the forms our students require. (p. 251)

After collecting the essays, the teacher corrected them, then explained the errors to his students and gave them the correct forms. Later on, a typewritten version of the essays (without correction) was given back to the students, and the teacher asked them to correct their essays themselves. The aim was to make a comparison between the number of errors produced before correction and those made, by the same students, after the teacher's correction.

The following diagram (Figure 1) summarises the analytical framework of this study.

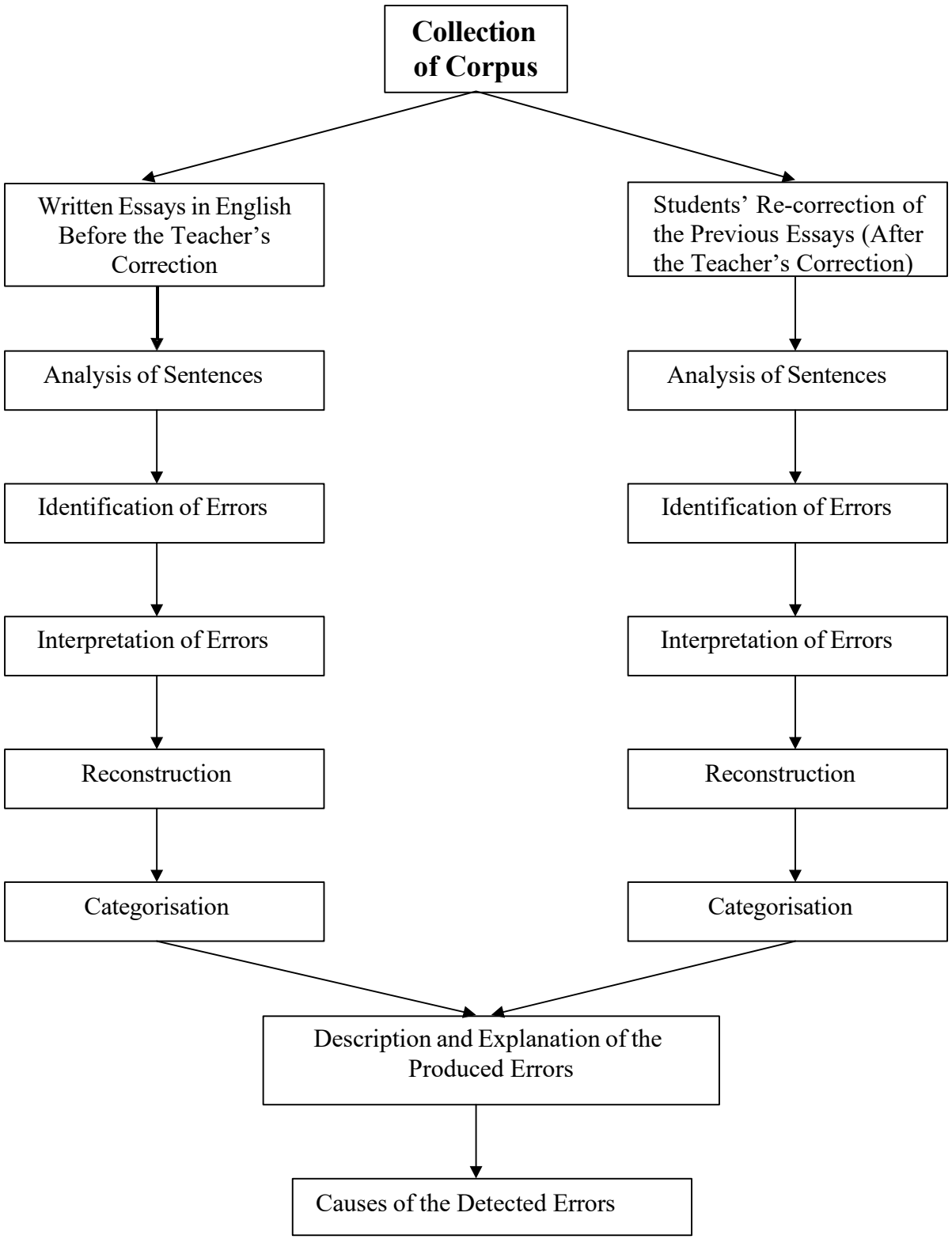


Fig.1. Stages of Data Analysis

3. Data Analysis

The analysis revealed that the 274 errors produced by the learners at the sentential level fall into six main categories: nouns, verbs, modifiers, prepositions, syntax, and lexical items. However, the major problems facing students when writing in English lie on the categories of lexical items (120 errors) and verbs (52 errors), which respectively represent 43.80% and 18.98% of the total number of errors as shown in Figure 2.

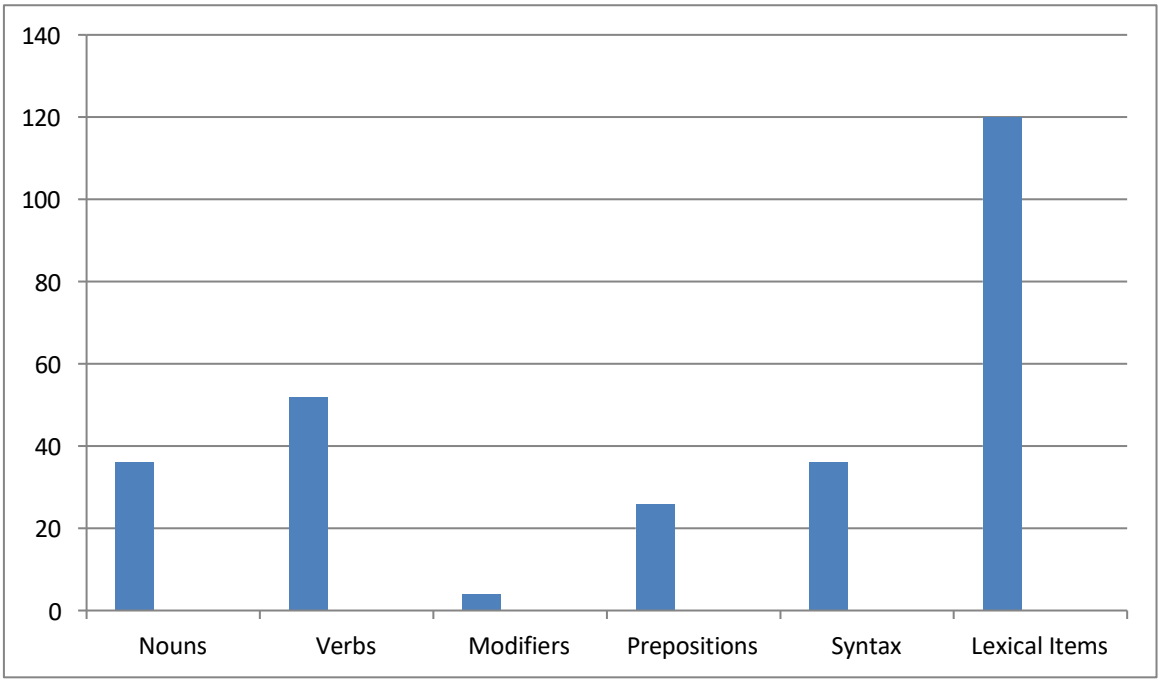


Fig.2. Errors before Correction within the Six Categories

(The Six Categories)

Moreover, within the lexical items category, the majority of errors (59 errors) fall into the sub-category of spelling, with a rate of 21.53% of the total number of errors (see Figure 3). Whereas, among the category of verbs, the highest number of errors is in the sub-category of tenses (45 errors) with a rate of 16.42% of the total number of errors (see Figure 4).

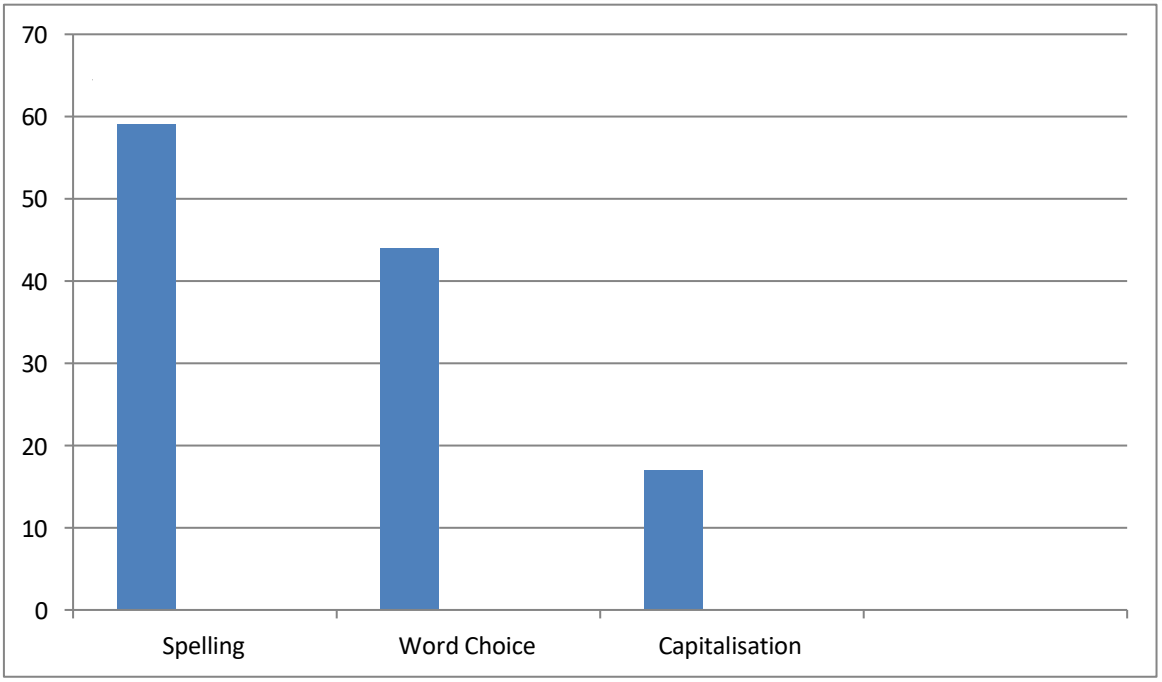


Fig. 3. Errors before Correction: Lexical Items Category

(The Three Lexical Sub-categories)

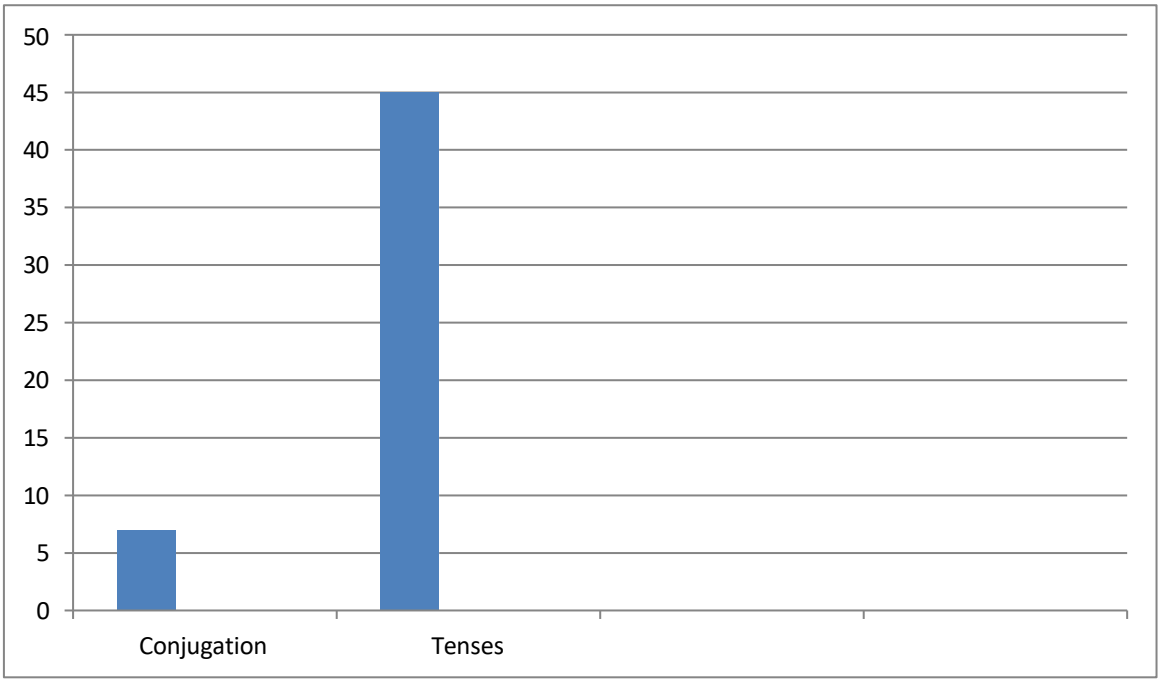


Fig.4. Errors before Correction: Verbs Category

(The Two Verb Sub-categories)

A wrong spelling may result from a French interference (since French is the first foreign language students have learned), as in the utterance:

e.g. *I went to Alger.

Instead of: I went to Algiers.

Furthermore, spelling errors may also be due to an incomplete knowledge of the vocabulary, which may lead the learner to write the word as he/she hears it, as seen in the following example:

e.g. * We ricived our neighbours.

Instead of: We received our neighbours.

As for verbs, errors may be due to an incomplete knowledge of the use of tenses, which makes students use the present perfect, for instance, instead of the simple past as in the following example:

e.g. *I have gone to the seaside.

Instead of: I went to the seaside.

In addition to this, the analysis showed that the number of errors considerably decreased after the teacher's correction and explanation of errors (274 errors before correction vs. 134 after correction), mainly in the sub-category of spelling (59 errors before correction vs. 24 after correction) and that of tenses (45 errors before correction vs. 23 after correction), as mentioned, respectively, in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

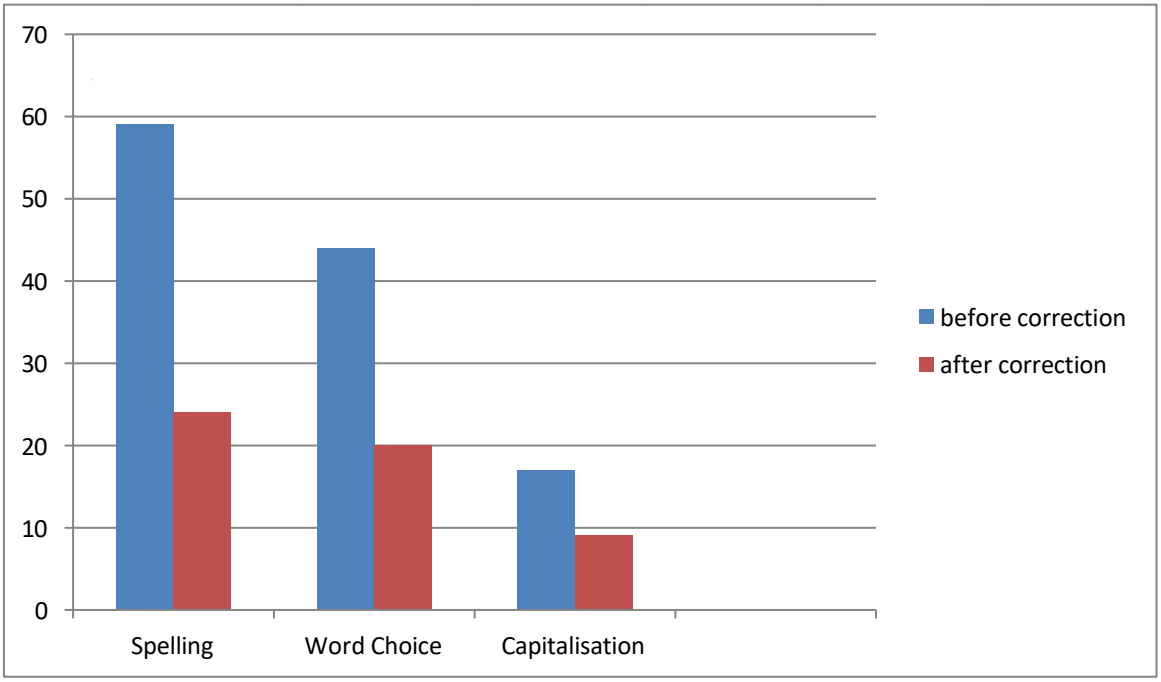


Fig.5. Errors before and after Correction: Lexical Items Category

(The Three Lexical Sub-categories)

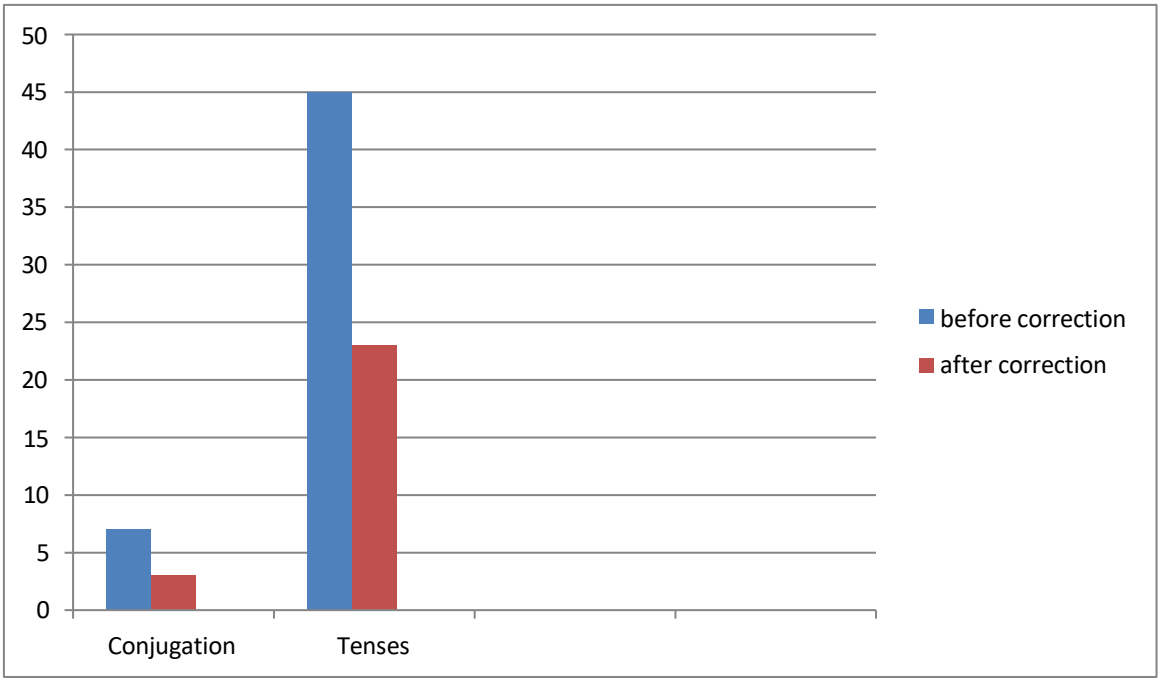


Fig.6. Errors before and after Correction: Verbs Category

(The Two Verb Sub-categories)

However, it is noticed that learners still have some difficulties correcting their errors concerning the use of pronouns (5 errors before correction v.s. 4 after correction) and modifiers (4 errors before correction v.s. 3 after correction), even if they did not make many errors in these categories.

Finally, Figure 7 summarises the comparison between the number of errors made by EFL students in their writings before correction and those produced by the same students after the teacher's correction.

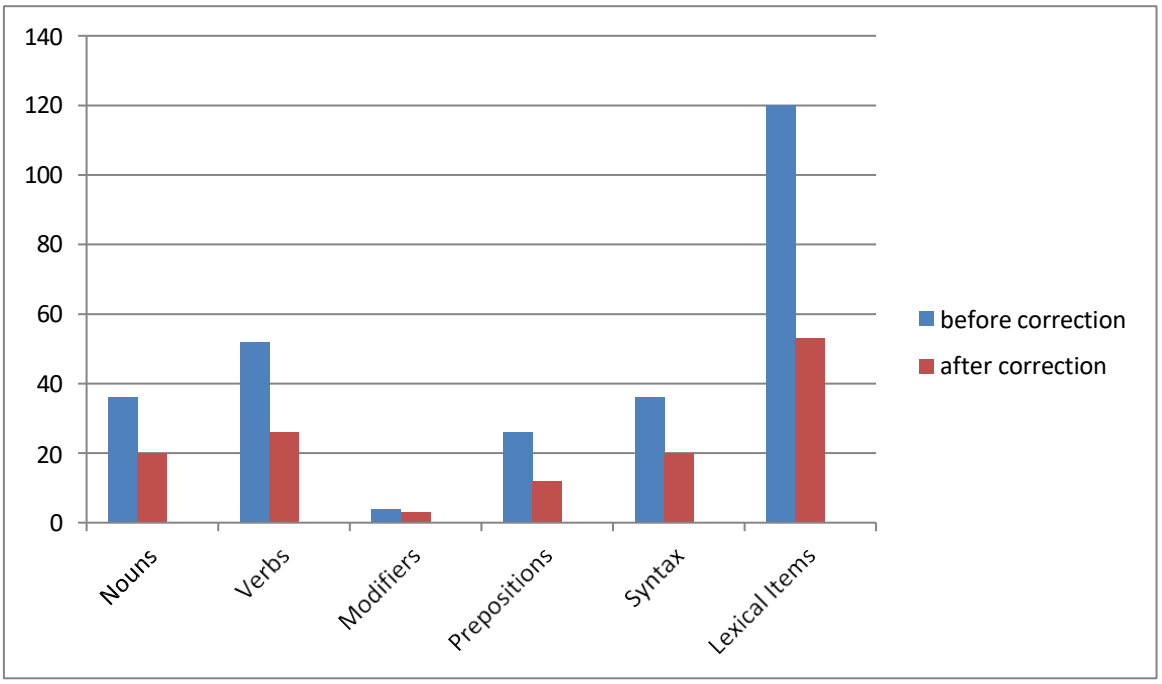


Fig.7. Number of Errors Produced before and after Correction

(The Six Categories)

Notes: The sign (*) is put before every erroneous sentence

4. *Conclusion*

To conclude, the results obtained through this EA confirm the validity of the researcher's hypothesis, which means that correction is effective in tackling students' errors, mainly those of spelling. However, correction alone is not enough to address every student's writing issue; it should be complemented by other remedial techniques such as dictation and re-teaching, in addition to selecting appropriate exercises and games.

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