A Teacher's Perspective:
Prescriptivism in Second-Language Education

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1 Introduction

L2 students of English have to be prepared for the English-speaking world outside the classroom. Apart from having to be capable of participating in any daily conversation that they might come across during and after secondary school, students also need to be able to function well in a professional environment using a suitable level of academic English. Secondary school, and especially the English classes that follow an established curriculum, are the place where this preparation has to be done successfully. L2 English teachers, teachers who teach English as a second language, have a great responsibility in carrying out this task. Not only are they responsible for teaching the students the English language, but they are also responsible for establishing a good learning environment for their students.

This good learning environment needs to adhere to certain conditions. Without these conditions, students will be unable and unwilling to learn, study, and grow academically. A first and essential condition is *safety*. Students must feel that they are completely and utterly safe in their learning environment. This, amongst other things, includes the opportunity to make errors. Making errors is an important part of every learning process, because by making errors, a student understands which of the student's skills are adequate and which need to be improved. Correcting these errors in a proper, effective way, without destroying the self-confidence of the student, is easier said than done. How do teachers correct errors in such a way that the student does not lose their motivation or their enthusiasm in learning the language? And even more importantly, how do teachers make sure the student actually learns from their errors?

This thesis presents an insight into the way teachers correct certain errors: usage problems. Usage problems, according to Straaijer (2018), are language features that users consider to be problematic (p. 29). They present difficulties in the English language that could result in confusion for learners: what is correct, and what is not? Therefore, it is a teacher's responsibility to decide which usage problems should be taught according to prescriptive rules,

and of which the usage should simply be mentioned and discussed: more than one variety of the usage problem could be considered correct.

Importantly, this thesis focuses on usage problem errors, and not on competence L2-learner errors. This distinction is essential to the topic of this thesis and will be discussed in detail. Moreover, the research in this thesis is based on the Standard British English linguistic model, since this is the model which is normally taught in Dutch high schools to L2 English students (Oostdam & Van Toorenburg, 2002, p. 8; Holdinga, 2007, p. 33). Therefore, all usage problem errors are discussed in the context of Standard British English.

This thesis presents a case study on prescriptive correction. It reports on a study consisting of 1) a survey directed at L2 English teachers in The Netherlands, and 2) a series of interviews, conducted at a Dutch high school in Alphen aan den Rijn, South Holland. At both stages in the data collection process, the survey respondents and interview participants were asked about their approach to correcting usage problem errors in the classroom. Finally, the goal of this thesis is to determine if L2 English teachers use a prescriptive approach while correcting usage problem errors, and if they do, to which extent. It is my estimation that at the school discussed in this thesis, using a prescriptive approach is preferred.

First, three background chapters will define the terminology and create a framework for the research: prescriptivism, second-language teaching in the Netherlands, and the concept of 'error'. After that, I will present my research questions, hypotheses and methodology. Following those are the results, a discussion and finally the conclusion to the research.

2 Background

2.1 Prescriptivism

Milroy and Milroy (1985) state that "prescription depends on an ideology [...] concerning language which requires that in language use [...] things shall be done the right way" (p. 1). It is especially this "ideology" of doing things "the right way", or which degree of language prescriptivism should be used, which is a topic of debate in the domain of education is (Sylvester Dacy, Nihalani, Cestone & Robinson, 2011). This debate is also important for example when policy makers decide on the instruction books used in their departments. Namely, there are books that use a prescriptive approach, such as *New Interface* (Cornford, 2008) published by ThiemeMeulenhoff, or books that use a descriptive approach, such as *English in Mind* (Puchta & Stranks, 2010) by Cambridge University Press. The choice between these books has consequences not only on the way in which teachers and staff deal with learning problems in the classroom, but also on decisions made by policy-makers regarding the level of English and the skills students should acquire by the time they finish their high school education. However, it is important to consider the influence language prescriptivism can have on these important issues.

To be able to investigate this, the terminology concerning prescriptivism should be clarified. In this thesis, the terms 'prescriptivism', 'prescriptive rules', and 'prescriptive approach' are used to discuss the topic of prescriptivism. Firstly, the general term prescriptivism should be defined. Milroy and Milroy (1985) introduce their definition by means of comparing it to a dinner etiquette situation, by stating that, alike language rules, rules for setting a formal dinner table are imposed "from above" (p. 1) instead of "agreed amongst the guests themselves" (ctd.). Curzan (2014) compares prescriptivism to traffic rules (p. 28) and describes prescriptivism as "those language rules about 'good' or 'better' or 'correct' usage created, perpetuated, and enforced by widely recognized often institutionalized language

authorities" (p. 5). The enforcement part of the definition is vital in the context of this study, since I am investigating the degree to which the prescriptive rules are actually taught top-down in the context of second-language education in The Netherlands.

Exactly opposite to prescriptivism stands its counterpart: descriptivism. Instead of focusing on prescribing the rules, descriptivism describes the way speakers use the language and is focused on speakers' intuition instead of top-down imposed grammatical rules. Cameron (1995) defines descriptive rules as "formulae which capture the patterned regularities in language" (p. 6). She continues by stating that using language is a "social practice" (ibid.) which means that people in certain social circles are expected to use a certain type of language. A good example of this is the abbreviated form *ain't*, which is described as standard usage in, for example, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Debose, 1994, p. 128; Weldon, 1994, p. 364).

Secondly, in the context of this thesis, prescriptive rules and prescriptive approach should be defined. Prescriptive rules are rules which prescribe correct usage by means of "explicit normative statements" (Lukač, 2018, p. 107). An example of a prescriptive rule can be found in example (1) below.

(1) To indicate future actions, use *shall* with first person pronouns and *will* for second and third (Wilson & Wauson, 2010).

Contrary to a prescriptive rule, a prescriptive approach does not apply to usage problems themselves, but to the way teachers deal with usage problems while teaching in the classroom. If teachers use a prescriptive approach while correcting a student, they will invoke a prescriptive rule in doing so. If teachers refrain from using a prescriptive approach, they will either use a descriptive approach or they will ignore the usage problem whatsoever. An example of a prescriptive (2) and descriptive (3) approach can be found below.

(2) Student: *I will be late today.*
Teacher: *The correct form here is shall. I shall be late today. You should use shall with I and we, and will with you, he, she and it.*

(3) Student: *I will be late today.*
Teacher: *OK. Another way to say this is 'I shall be late today'. Both forms are used interchangeably.*

The remainder of this section will first provide a concise, chronological overview of the development of prescriptivism, as well as teachers' and linguists' attitudes towards it in the context of education. Second, it will sketch a framework for the applicability of and attitudes towards the concept of prescriptivism in the context of education.

2.1.1 The history of prescriptivism. Throughout history, prescriptivism has played a big part in the standardisation processes of languages. According to Percy and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2016), "all [standardisation] developments reflect a perceived need for prescription, which itself derives from linguistic, cultural, religious, ideological, political, educational and other needs" (p. 1). From as early as the eighteenth century, authors from various professional fields published usage guides (e.g. Baker, 1770; Fowler, 1926), which prescribed rules for speakers of a certain language to follow. Consequently, these usage guides were written using a prescriptive approach: there are certain rules and through following these rules, you become proficient in your native language.

A tool to investigate the extent of prescriptivism in usage guides with is the *Hyper Usage Guide of English (HUGE)* database (Straaijer, 2015): a collection of usage or style guides and their entries. A browse through the *HUGE* database provides some insight into the history of prescriptivism. The database contains 77 usage guides and most of them are easily accessible through simple or complex searches, which yield various results. The oldest usage guide featured in the database is Baker's *Reflections on the English Language* (1770). The latest usage guide featured is Heffer's *Strictly English: The Correct Way to Write…. And why It Matters* (2010). The usage guides included in the database therefore span more than two centuries. This is an indication that the topic of rulemaking and prescriptivism was popular in

the eighteenth century as well as today. However, the approaches these usage guides use to give advice is not always very prescriptive in nature. Especially the more modern usage guides seem to sum up options from which the reader is able to choose their favourite – a comparison of the language used in these guides is provided later in this section.

An example of a modern, descriptive usage guide is Kamm's *Accidence Will Happen* from 2015. In addition to providing a concise overview of some contemporary usage problems, Kamm also provides an insight into the debate about usage problems throughout the years. He states that the origin of the "disputes over English usage" (Kamm, 2015, p. 78) date from approximately the seventeenth century. However, the books published in that century described Latin instead of English. The eighteenth century, Kamm states, saw the origins of "grammars that sought to instruct English speakers in their own tongue" (p. 79). Various publications (e.g. Sheridan, 1780; Swift, 1712) described the deplorable state of English grammar and written standards, and aimed to improve them. The second part of the eighteenth century saw two important publications: Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762). According to Kamm (2015), these two publications are an example of the prescriptive–descriptive discussion, although their assumptions are not unchallenged (Edwards, 1994, p. 160). Kamm (2015) argues that "these works [were] working to the same end – yet they in fact took different approaches" (p. 83).

As mentioned above, the earliest usage guide mentioned in HUGE is Baker's *Reflections on the English Language* (1770). According to Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2010, p. 16) and Kamm (2015, p. 84), this book was the pioneer of prescribing correct English usage. It is a book that prescribes rules about the meaning of words. Baker has very specific ideas about which language variants are correct and which is not, and he uses clear language to make his point. Two examples of this, found through searches in the HUGE database, are his arguments for two usage problems. Firstly, on the topic of correct preposition usage for the

expression *different to*, he states: "the Impropriety of the Expression would be glaring, and would shock every Hearer. […] I would therefore give my Vote for *different from*, and would banish the Expression of *different to*" (Baker, 1770, pp. 7–8). Clearly, this is a prescriptive approach. A second example is his opinion about the sentence adverbs *only* and *either* (and their negative counterparts): "THERE are innumerable Instances of the wrong placing these Words. *Only*, by not being in its proper Place, gives a Sense not intended. *Not only*, *Neither* and *Either*, by being out of their Places, make Nonsense" (p. 124). Again, he emphasises the incorrectness of some uses of these words. The language Baker – and his contemporaries – used to describe these problems is colloquial and sometimes extremely judgemental. More often than not, this language is dotted with labels such as 'nonsense', 'barbaric', 'foolish', etc. (Sundby, Haugland & Bjørge, 1991, p. 38). Probably, this was intended to persuade the readers of their usage guides to use 'correct' language or otherwise be deemed unintelligent. This would have had a great effect on the eighteenth-century readers.

Twentieth-century usage guides, such as Kamm's, tend to take another approach to explaining the correctness of certain grammatical features. More than once, Kamm refers to prescriptivists as 'sticklers' and 'pedants', indicating his disagreement with their attitudes towards educating English readers. He himself uses accessible language and rather provides an overview of language in use. Moreover, he explains the preferred forms of certain usage problems in certain situations. For instance, he describes the *different from/than/to* usage problem, saying that "*different from, different to* and *different than* are all correct though not equally common" (p. 164). Next, he discusses in which varieties of the English language the one is more common than the other and states that "none of these constructions is an abomination" (ctd.). Supporting his argument, he quotes examples from English writers, such as Charlotte Brontë, G.K. Chesterton and Anthony Trollope (p. 165).

Considering both the prescriptive and descriptive approaches, the question remains what the place of prescriptivism is in teaching English as a second language. The question remains: what is the most efficient way of teaching a language to students? Do teachers use a prescriptive approach and have their students adhere to strict rules, or do they present their students with the full picture and do they give them linguistic freedom by presenting them with all possibilities using a descriptive approach? These are the questions relevant for the research in this thesis.

2.2 Second-language Teaching in The Netherlands

From the beginning of the officialisation of second-language teaching in The Netherlands, several trends have dominated the school curricula. These trends all use different degrees of prescriptivism. This section will first provide a summary of the chronological overview of the different teaching methods, based on the information provided by Richards and Rogers (1986). Subsequently, it will place present-day methods used in Dutch high schools in context of these different teaching methods and simultaneously in the context of the prescriptive–descriptive discussion. Finally, this section will give a short insight into the current debate about the choice of one method over the other.

2.2.1 Teaching methods: a chronological overview. Richards and Rogers (1986) list a number of general trends in language education that dominated Dutch high schools over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Educationalists and other people involved in reforming second-language education decided on the most ideal method to use to teach students at that time. The school system and the curricula were then adapted to fit the new trend. Consequently, this caused English instructional methods to change regularly during the twentieth century.

First, when second-language instruction became institutionalised, it was largely based on a method called the Grammar-Translation Method. Derived from teaching methods used for

students learning Latin in the classical era, this method uses the principles of translating sentences from the source language into the target language. According to Richards and Rogers (1986), "the goal of foreign language study is to learn a language in order to read its literature or in order to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from foreign-language study" (p. 3). This method focused primarily – and in many ways, only – on reading and writing, which automatically excluded communication skills from the curriculum. Additionally, this method use deductive principles to teach new grammatical structures to students. In other words, grammar rules are presented and explained to the students, who are then asked to practise and acquire them. Consequently, this method uses a prescriptive approach to teach its students a new language.

The Grammar-Translation Method was preferred for around a century, between 1840 and 1940. Afterwards, "increased opportunities for communication among Europeans created a demand for oral proficiency in foreign languages" (Richards & Rogers, 1986, p. 5). This was especially true for the English language, which in that time became increasingly known as a lingua franca in Europe and in the world. The Grammar-Translation Method, therefore, could no longer meet the requirements for successfully preparing students to participate in an increasingly English-speaking world. There was a bigger need for more proficiency in listening and speaking skills, and for a method which actively engaged students to participate in an English society; a more descriptive method based on authentic material. The movement towards such a method was called the Reform Movement. Predominantly, this movement – initiated by linguists – aimed to switch the focus of second-language education from passive to active skills. A very important aspect of all teaching methods that grew out of the Reform Movement is that "translation should be avoided" (p. 8). Moreover, the principles for the Reform Movement methods feature many aspects of descriptive learning. Three principles are

essential to the parallel between the Reform Movement and the current discussion about the prescriptive–descriptive dilemma.

Firstly, the "principle of exposure" entails that learners should first be exposed to the language before being asked to practise or learn new grammatical structures. Secondly, the "principle of context" deems context is a necessary tool for learners to able to acquire new skills in a foreign language, and, finally, the "principle of inductiveness" explains that a task-based teaching curriculum should be upheld.

These three principles are visible in teaching books today. The principles of exposure and context are included in the teaching books by introducing students to an authentic text from which they have to elicit the grammar rules. This strategy is predominantly found in books that use English as a language of instruction (English-based books); they use descriptive teaching strategies in this regard since they allow students to decide what correct usage is based on evidence from an authentic text. The "principle of inductiveness" – related to the concept of task-based learning – is put in practice in a different way: most teaching books present the students with a task at the end of a chapter. A teacher can therefore choose to include the principle of inductiveness by starting with this task when a new chapter is introduced. This choice gives the teacher some authority regarding the Reform Movement in the classroom.

A first specific method that grew out of the Reform Movement is the Direct Method. This method specifically aims to instruct learners in a second language as if it were their first. To do this, it uses the same principles as parents use to teach their children to speak. Amongst other things, the Direct Method uses demonstration instead of translation to teach new words and concepts to the learners of the method (p. 10). This mimics a parent/child relationship. Furthermore, the Direct Method focuses more on teaching appropriate pronunciation and communication than other skills such as reading and writing, or supporting elements such as grammar and vocabulary. Eventually, the Direct Method proved to be only partially successful.

It worked relatively well in the context of skilled learners and in combination with a small group and extremely well organised school systems. However, it was deemed almost inapplicable in regular public school education. It was considered inefficient and difficult to implement. Generally, the reason for this was that the Direct Method was too descriptive in nature; not all students can be taught without being provided with any rules whatsoever. However, new methods did come into being from this Direct Method.

The methods that originated from the Direct Method focused on oral skills and repetition and therefore prepared students in a good way for communicating in the English language. Especially the use of well known situations results in a larger intrinsic motivation in the students, since they learn about situations that they may encounter in real life. The most positively received method based on this principle was the Audiolingual Method. Apart from focusing on real-life situations and communication, it also dealt with structural linguistic theory and contrastive analysis of the two languages. The contrastive analysis, according to the Audiolingualists, was important, because the difficulties in learning a new language originate from the differences in grammatical structures between the source and target languages.

This method was rejected by Chomsky (1966), amongst others, who stated that "language is not a habit structure. Ordinary linguistic behaviour characteristically involves innovation, formation of new sentences and patterns in accordance with rules of great abstractness and intricacy" (Chomsky, 1966, p. 153). Audiolingualism does not adhere to this condition of 'linguistic behaviour' since it focuses on structure and existing rules and not on the changing nature of language and its innovation. Currently, teaching books still struggle with balancing structure with flexibility when it comes to the introduction of new grammatical rules and the way exercises are structured.

The criticisms by Chomsky and other linguists finally resulted in an innovative change in the way languages were taught. The prime example of a method that followed this

development was Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Richards & Rogers, 1986, pp. 67–68). The most important differences between the Audiolingual Method and CLT can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1 *Major differences between the Audiolingual Method and CLT*[1]

No.	Audiolingual method	CLT
1	Attends to structure and form more than meaning.	Meaning is paramount.
2	Language learning is learning structures, sounds, or words.	Language learning is learning to communicate.
3	Grammatical explanation is avoided.	Any device which helps the learners is accepted – varying according to their age, interest, etc.
4	The target linguistic system will be learned through the overt teaching of the patterns of the system.	The target linguistic system[2] will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate.
5	Students are expected to interact with the language system, embodied in machines or controlled materials.	Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work, or in their writings.
6	Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in the structure of the language.	Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language.

In many ways, CLT is still very much a topic for discussion. Something that was greeted with much enthusiasm in the 'new' system was its flexibility. Whereas previous methods prescribed certain rules of teaching and did not really allow students or teachers to deviate from these rules, CLT took a whole other direction in this matter. It allowed teachers to adapt their curriculum to fit the needs of the students. In addition, it created more room for teachers to develop themselves. Moreover, teachers did not need to be native speakers of the language anymore since accurate pronunciation was no longer the goal at hand.

[1] Summarised from Richards & Rogers (1986).
[2] For this research, the target linguistic system is Standard British English. However, in context of descriptive teaching, other varieties of English were considered as well.

2.2.2 L2 English teaching books in The Netherlands. Nowadays, L2 English methods used in The Netherlands seem to be communicatively oriented, in line with CLT. However, there are certain elements of the currently used method which are not completely agreed upon. For instance, there is a clear difference between English teaching books which use a prescriptive approach when teaching a language and therefore focus on teaching prescriptive rules, and there are some that do not. For instance, there are a number of teaching books used in Dutch high schools that use Dutch as the language of instruction (Dutch-based books). This entails that the rules at hand are presented in Dutch, example sentences are written in Dutch and students are asked to translate Dutch sentences into English to practise using certain grammatical features. Moreover, and most importantly, these rules are predominantly presented prescriptively: they present a new grammatical item and then prescribe the usage of a certain form. In doing so, these books do not adhere to descriptive principles of acknowledging different varieties of English and the various forms in which certain grammatical rules are used. On the other hand, other books do not use this tactic: they present students with the different varieties of a certain grammatical feature and explain in which contexts and countries these varieties are appropriate. Afterwards, they practise with the feature in English and therefore become familiarised with using the language.

An example of these different tactics of teaching grammatical items is the way books deal with teaching *shall* and *will* to indicate futurity. A well known usage problem, *shall* and *will* have yielded much discussion amongst linguists and teachers. The central question is whether we should prescribe the rule, which tells us to use *shall* with first person pronouns and *will* for second and third (Wilson & Wauson, 2010), or describe the custom that both *shall* and *will* can be used interchangeably or even that *shall* in this sense is disappearing from standard usage (Bergs, 2010, p. 223)? Kamm (2015) agrees with the latter by suggesting to "use *will*, because not many people use *shall* for anything any longer" (p. 243). The teaching books

currently used in The Netherlands use different ways to teach students how to use *shall* and *will*. A quick comparison of the language of instruction in six of the most-used books in Dutch secondary schools for the highest level of secondary education can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2 *Teaching strategies concerning* shall *and* will *(Steenhof, 2016, p. 13)*

Title	Language	Page(s)	Teaching terms
New Interface	Dutch	111–112	*"Use *shall* instead of *will* with interrogative sentences" *"Often, contracted forms are used: *'ll, shan't* and *won't*"
Solutions!	English	91	"We use *will* to talk about the future"
Of Course!	Dutch	138–139	*"Use *will* to indicate a future event" *"For *I* and *we*, you can choose between *will* and *shall*"
English in Mind	English	69	"Underline examples of *will* and *won't* in the texts" "We use *will* or *will not* + base form to make predictions about the future"
Go for it!	Dutch	39	*"You use *will* for facts in the future" *"*Shall* is rare"

Two things are noteworthy when analysing the results.[3] Firstly, English-based books do not mention *shall* or *shan't* anymore, but encourage the students to use *will* or *won't*. All three Dutch-based books do mention *shall* in some way, as can be observed in the entries above for *New Interface, Of Course!* and *Go for it!* Secondly, there is a difference in the extent of prescriptivism used in these books. Clearly, the approach to teaching grammar rules Dutch-based books use is more prescriptive than that of their English counterparts. The former present the rules in their grammar overviews and prescribe when to use *shall* or *will*. English-based books, however, describe the language used instead of prescribing the rule. This difference is

[3] These results are taken from Steenhof (2016).

an example of the relevance of the prescriptive–descriptive discussion in second-language teaching in The Netherlands. Not only do the different teaching methods mentioned in the chronological overview in this section influence the teaching style in general, but they also influence the way students deal with usage problems specifically.

It is important not only to place this discussion in the context of the debate between descriptive and prescriptive teaching, but also to think about the various ways this choice could influence a teacher's behaviour towards their students and the students' behaviour towards one another. Keeping in mind teachers should always act with the aim to prepare students for the world after school, educationalists and policy makers should always involve communication and conversational techniques in the preparation of curricula. It is exactly the percentage of communicative exercises and techniques incorporated in a teaching method that decide on the atmosphere in the classroom and the results the students will get from their education. On the one hand, in a very prescriptive book which incorporates translation exercises as the basis of learning English as a foreign language (so-called TR-methods), students will acquire extensive passive skills in the English language as well as an ability of applying their knowledge to reading and writing practice exercises. Teachers will assume the role of classic teacher who decide on the curriculum, explains structures and checks students' work. This is a very important part of learning a language, but does not meet the modern requirements set for example by CITO[4] in The Netherlands. A certain level of communicative skills is required. Therefore, modern TR-methods always include a certain number of communication exercises or audio fragments to support its grammar-based structure. However, its basic principle is still based on teaching prescriptive rules.

On the other hand, other, more communication-based methods (CLT-based methods), do exist. These methods try to be descriptive and actually prepare students with task-based

[4] The company which sets the norms and creates the final exams for high school subjects in The Netherlands.

chapters for specific, communicative goals. Importantly, it is still the teacher's choice to use these methods in the way in which they were meant to be used. More than once, for instance, teachers' preferences have clashed with school requirements, which tend to focus on learning grammatical rules. CLT, as described before, is based on principles of flexibility, communication and cooperation. These principles, at first glance, are well fitted to prepare a learner for a foreign-language speaking environment. However, considering the norms and rules of high school diplomas and the CEFR, there is still a gap between the flexibility of CLT-based methods and the rigidness of, especially, the CITO-norms. It would be ideal if these norms and the methods used would be the same.

2.3 The Concept of 'Error'

Before being able to decide on the approach L2 English teachers use to correct and guide students during classes, the concept of an 'error' needs to be defined. It may seem as though an error is straightforward and its definition is entirely obvious. However, in line with the differences between prescriptivism and descriptivism, the distinction between the errors used for the research is essential. Some errors are competence L2-learner errors, and other are prescriptive, or usage problem errors. Only the latter will be used in the research.

2.3.1 Competence L2-learner error. For this thesis, I define competence L2-learner errors as errors students make because they have not yet learnt or mastered certain grammatical features (Touchie, 1986, p. 76). They are high-frequency errors which hinder the intelligibility of the students in question (Touchie, 1986, p. 77) and produce ungrammatical utterances. Students who, for instance, use the wrong tense for the wrong situation have to learn the correct option. If they fail to do so, they may be misunderstood, or they may not be able to communicate. Dialogue (4) below illustrates one of these competence L2-learner errors.

(4) Student: *I have been to the cinema yesterday.*
Teacher: *Remember, how should we use the word yesterday?*
Student: [hesitant] *Using the… past?*
Teacher: *Which past tense?*
Student: *The past… simple?*
Teacher: *OK; can you correct your sentence using the past simple?*
Student: *I went to the cinema yesterday.*
Teacher: *Excellent, well done.*

It is known that Dutch students tend to confuse the present perfect simple tense with the past simple tense, since Dutch lacks a "grammaticalized Progressive" (De Swart, 2007, p. 2293), as can be seen in (5) and (6) below.

(5) Jij hebt dit gisteren gedaan.
You have this yesterday done.

(6) You did this yesterday.

However, since this is a grammatical rule in English – at least for now, such an error is called a competence L2-learner error. Another example of one of these errors, for instance, is the usage of the articles *a* and *an*, which cannot be used interchangeably. Therefore, students have to learn to use one or the other, or risk not being able to communicate their message successfully.

2.3.2 Usage problem error. Usage problem errors are defined as errors made by students concerning usage problems featured in the HUGE database and/or similar sources, contrary to competence L2-learner errors. For this thesis, I will use the usage problem lists from the HUGE database, and in addition, I will use the usage problems defined in Kamm (2015). Therefore, all usage problems discussed in the HUGE database and in Kamm's usage guide are treated as usage problem errors.

Examples are the usage of *ain't,* the split infinitive and preposition stranding. First, *ain't* (7), is a contraction for *have* and *be* and is considered incorrect in standard British English usage. Second, the split infinitive (8) is the separation of *to* and the verb by any word, which has long been deemed incorrect usage, but is now gradually considered correct. Third, preposition stranding (9) is the placing of a preposition at the end of a sentence. The following sentences illustrate the three examples:

(7) Ain't nobody got time for that!

(8) To boldly go where no man has gone before.

(9) Who did you give that to?

Except for the categorisation of usage problem error, it is necessary to specifically decide on the nature of the various usage problems involved in this research. According to Kostadinova (2018, p. 157), usage problems are paramount and can differ on various levels,

such as their aspect of usage, the strength with which they are prescribed and the different strands of prescriptivism (Curzan, 2014, p. 24):

- Standardizing prescriptivism: rules/judgments that aim to promote and enforce standardization and "standard" usage.
- Stylistic prescriptivism: rules/judgments that aim to differentiate among (often fine) points of style within standard usage.
- Restorative prescriptivism: rules/judgments that aim to restore earlier, but now relatively obsolete, usage and/or turn to older forms to purify usage.
- Politically responsive prescriptivism: rules/judgments that aim to promote inclusive, non-discriminatory, politically correct, and/or politically expedient usage.

Using these strands, I am able to place certain prescriptive rules in certain categories. Moreover, she is able to apply certain theories to these rules which then enable her to make certain choices about whether or not to use them. Importantly, Curzan states herself that rules can be dynamic. Dependent on the changing nature of languages, rules may belong in one category at one time and in another at a different time (p. 25). For this research, I will use these four strands as the prime categorisation tool for the usage problem error students make and the way teachers correct those errors. The rest of this section will outline the four strands of prescriptivism and will give some examples of the rules and errors associated with each strand.

Standardising prescriptivism defines the type of prescriptivism normally featured in the last stage of any standardisation process: prescription and codification (Milroy & Milroy, 1985, p. 27). As such, it plays a vital part in education since Standard British English is instructed in The Netherlands. Generally, over the length of a course or book chapter, language instruction follows a structure which guides the student in their learning process. Firstly, the learning objectives are outlined. Subsequently, the language rules which need to be studied are introduced. Thirdly, the students practise the rules and finally, as certain test is presented by means of which the student's knowledge is tested. It is in the second stage of this educational process that standardising prescriptivism is introduced, since the codified language features of Standard British English are used to teach the student. For example, the prescriptive rule tells

students to use *I am not*, instead of *I ain't* and therefore uses an item of the Standard language to do so. Importantly, standardising prescriptivism, in the context of education, as Curzan (2014) states, implies that the rules presented are "more 'laws' than 'etiquette rules'" (p. 30), and therefore they are to be followed to the letter.

To test whether the teachers involved in this research use standardising prescriptivism, a number of examples must be considered in this regard.[5] Firstly, a prototype example of an error of standardising prescriptivism is the occurrence of *ain't* instead of *am/are/is + not*. *Ain't* is generally deemed non-standard usage by speakers of Standard British English language, but is accepted in numerous varieties of colloquial English. This linguistic feature has been extensively discussed throughout history. The following table provides some insight into the treatment of *ain't* in usage guides.

Table 3 *Entries for* ain't *in various usage guides throughout history (taken from HUGE)*

Title	**Author**	**Year**	**Entry text (summarised)**
The Vulgarities of Speech Corrected	Maria Edgeworth	1826	"[a'n't it] is decidedly the most vulgar and incorrect expression in common use" (pp. 22–24).
A Dictionary of Modern English Usage	Henry Fowler	1926	"a(i)n't is merely colloquial […] & serves no useful purpose" (pp. 44–45).
Practical English Usage	Michael Swan	1980	"Ain't is not used in standard ('correct') English, but it is a very common word in dialects and 'uneducated' forms of British and American English" (p. 34).
The Oxford Guide to the English Language	Robert Burchfield et al.	1984	"...ain't (= are not, is not, have not, has not) is not used in Standard English except in representations of dialect speech, or humorously" (p. 90).
Accidence Will Happen	Oliver Kamm	2015	"Children are routinely scolded for using this word. … It is a contraction [...] and it makes grammatical sense. Yet at some point it became a taboo word and has remained so" (pp. 122–123).

[5] The examples listed are taken from Curzan (2014) unless mentioned otherwise.

Clearly, some usage guide authors write prescriptively about *ain't*, deeming it "vulgar" (Edgeworth, 1826, pp. 22–24). Others use a more descriptive approach, accepting *ain't* as a colloquial term and describing its usage (Swan, 1980, p. 34). This discussion makes *ain't* a good example of standardising prescriptivism.

Another good example of standardising prescriptivism is the occurrence of hypercorrection of subject and object pronouns (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985; Boyland, 2001; Curzan, 2014). Curzan (2014) defines this feature by stating that "[using *I* in object position] is often seen as the result of hypercorrection or an attempt to increase the formality of the utterance by using *I* rather than *me*" (p. 32). L2-learners of English in high school tend to struggle with this, since they are generally confused as to the level of formality which is appropriate in certain situations. They then turn to their handbooks to guide them in this confusing situation. Consequently, depending on the teaching handbook and approach of the teacher dealt with this usage problem error, the solution and correction will always be different. Dialogues (10) and (11) below exemplify this.

(10) Teacher: *Are you doing this task by yourself?*
Student: *No, me and a classmate are doing the task together.*
Teacher: *Please rephrase that sentence.*
Student: *No, my classmate and I are doing the task together.*

(11) Teacher: *Did you have any problems during this lesson?*
Student: *Yes, this lesson has been very difficult for my friend and I.*
Teacher: *Please rephrase that sentence.*
Student: *Yes, this lesson has been very difficult for my friend and me.*

The second strand of prescriptivism Curzan (2014) talks about is stylistic prescriptivism. She defines it as "etiquette rules for how to use the language properly" (p. 33). This strand is different from the previous in its application: it is generally only applied to formal situations (i.e. both written and spoken language) and therefore regarded as less important for colloquial English. The importance of this kind of prescriptivism for educational purposes is slightly smaller than that of standardising prescriptivism, since formal skills are but a small

part of the skills students should acquire during their school days. However, especially in higher levels of education and in the higher classes, this skill becomes more important. Curzan (2014) lists a number of examples, amongst which is preposition stranding. Another extensively discussed subject in history, preposition stranding is the term given to the placement of prepositions at the end of a sentence instead of the beginning, as given in examples (12) and (13) below.

(12) Who are you talking to?

(13) To whom are you talking?

According to prescriptivists, only (13) is regarded as correct English. However, being an example of stylistic prescriptivism, the first version is also generally accepted, especially in non-formal English. In the classroom, this difference in acceptance results in a difficult dilemma: should teachers give students the room to use preposition stranding in non-formal English, but should they proscribe its use in formal English? Doing this could lead to confusion as to when exactly (12) is appropriate and when it is not. However, proscribing it entirely or allowing it in all contexts may result in a lesser acceptance of a student's English in their later life.

Thirdly, restorative prescriptivism is defined by Curzan (2014) as "encourag[ing] the restoration of older meanings purely for the sake of honoring past usage" (p. 36). She continues by adding that this kind of prescriptivism does not necessarily have a lot of influence on present-day usage and therefore in education, since in education, present-day English is taught. However, restorative prescriptivism may seep through and have some influence on actual usage in the classroom, since more experienced teachers who have been teaching for decades are likely to use this kind of prescriptivism since they may be nostalgic towards language items which are deemed old-fashioned by younger speakers. Examples of this could be, as Curzan (2014) states, using *nauseous* instead of *nauseated*, or the *shall–will* difference (p. 37), as

discussed earlier in this thesis as well. It is exactly the cases of restorative prescriptivism which cause the most discussion in deciding on the curriculum or the ways certain language items should be taught. In staff meetings, the younger and older teachers normally disagree on whether these items should be taught according to the old-fashioned rules, or whether we should describe the way they are used now. A typical example of the prescriptive–descriptive dilemma and therefore valuable to the research in this paper.

The final strand of prescriptivism Curzan (2014) describes is politically responsive prescriptivism. This is a very important kind of prescriptivism in the classroom, since it deals with respect, politically correct language and equality. Curzan defines it as "those rules or judgments that aim to promote inclusive, non-discriminatory, and/or politically correct or expedient usage" (p. 38). I argue that it is extremely important to teach our students these values in general in the knowledge that parents and teachers share the responsibility of raising children as competent adults. Realising that the development of choosing politically correct language is a development both in English and Dutch (examples (14)–(20)), teachers can adequately use this kind of prescriptivism in the classroom for both linguistic and societal functions. Consider the following example pairs in English and Dutch:

(14) ?Being a teacher can sometimes be difficult. He needs to be educated well!

(15) Being a teacher can sometimes be difficult. He or she needs to be educated well!

(16) Being a teacher can sometimes be difficult. They need to be educated well!

(17) How long has she been a salesman?

(18) How long has she been a salesperson?

(19) Let goed op de leerling. Hij moet altijd goed meedoen met de les!

(20) Let goed op de leerling. Hij/zij moet altijd goed meedoen met de les!
"Keep a close eye on the student. They should always participate in the lesson!"

These examples indicate that this kind of prescriptivism is accounted for in the classroom, since it has to do with profession vocabulary, ordinary propositions and many other common words or grammar items which students need to learn in class. Therefore, it is important to investigate if and in what way teachers use this kind of prescriptivism in the classroom.

3 Methodology & Analysis

3.1 Research question and hypotheses

The research consisted of two parts: a survey and one-on-one interviews. As a basis for the research, I have formulated research questions (21) and (22) below.

(21) Do L2 English teachers use a prescriptive approach to correct the usage problem errors their students make?

(22) What are the attitudes L2 English teachers have towards teaching using a prescriptive approach in the classroom?

Firstly, I hypothesise that L2 English teachers do not really know to which degree they are using a prescriptive approach while they teach. Secondly, I hypothesise that teaching practices are generally prescriptively oriented. This would entail that there is a primary focus on prescriptive rule teaching and a lesser focus on descriptive teaching approaches.

An additional question formulated for the research has to do with the two levels of education used: *Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs (VWO)*, the highest level of secondary education in The Netherlands and *Voorbereidend Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs (VMBO)*, the lowest level of secondary education in The Netherlands. The question is whether teachers use different techniques to correct their students in the one level of education and the other. My prediction is that in the lower-level classes teachers will give their students more rule-based corrections, as they tend to be easier to understand. By contrast, in the higher-level classes the students will be better equipped to understand directions.

The general approach of this research used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The first of the three main research questions was focused on whether the involved teachers correct usage problem errors made by students and if they did, whether they used a descriptive or prescriptive approach in doing so. This was tested by a survey distributed amongst L2 English teachers containing classroom situations in which a student utters a usage problem. Albeit hypothetical, the survey was a good means of researching this since it yielded

data about the degree of prescriptive approaches used. The second research question was explored by means of the survey as well, since the answers teachers provided gave some insight into their approach to correcting usage problem errors. Additionally, this question was answered by means of on one-on-one interviews with six teachers, in which the teachers were asked directly about their attitude towards, opinion of and eventual provisions against using a prescriptive approach to teach in the classroom.

3.2 Methodology

The survey respondents and interview participants[6] were primarily found at the Scala College, a high school in Alphen aan den Rijn, The Netherlands, in January 2018. This high school offers all levels[7] of secondary education which exist in The Netherlands, so the comparison between the two teaching levels could be easily made. Moreover, at management level, the current discussion is whether to switch to a personalised learning system like Kunskapsskolan,[8] which focuses on the individual needs of the student.

3.2.1 Survey methodology. The first part of the research was done by means of a survey, in which the respondents were presented with hypothetical scenarios which could take place during any English lesson, such as (23).

(23) Teacher: Do you think these pictures are the same?
Student: No, the one is different than the other.
Teacher: …

All scenarios were based on my personal teaching experiences. All scenarios presented usage problems taken from Kamm (2015)[9] which were then placed in the context of the classroom using hypothetical dialogues.

[6] The survey respondents and interview participants will be referred to by means of these two terms in this thesis.
[7] i.e. VWO, HAVO, VWO and bilingual education
[8] A Swedish educational modal based on student independence and student-based teaching (Eiken, 2011).
[9] Except otherwise indicated.

The survey presented 20 of these hypothetical situations to all respondents, keeping in mind that the situations should be as realistic as possible. The scenarios are based on actual situations which I came across while teaching. Additionally, the survey collected metadata about the respondents, such as age and education, which was cross-referenced with respondents' answers to see why they chose to act that way in the particular scenario.

The survey was distributed amongst L2 English secondary school teachers in The Netherlands. The survey was firstly distributed using the author's personal network of colleagues and acquaintances, and then distributed using the personal network of these colleagues. Therefore, the exact number of schools cannot be determined. Since more respondents were required after distributing the survey, 25 high schools in The Netherlands were contacted by phone or by email to ask them whether their teachers would be willing to participate. Getting in contact with the teachers proved to be extremely difficult, which caused in a lower number of respondents than expected. To enlarge the number of respondents, many high schools were contacted.

The survey was constructed in Qualtrics, a survey-making software programme which allows for correlational analysis options. Using this software, I created a survey which produces both qualitative and quantitative results. The survey was divided in two parts: multiple-choice questions, which yielded quantitative results, and open questions, which yielded quantitative and qualitative results. For every multiple-choice question, there were three options: no correction, a correction using a descriptive approach, and a correction using a prescriptive approach. An example of a survey scenario with the three multiple-choice answers is (24) below.

(24) Teacher: Do you think these pictures are the same?
Student: No, the one is different than the other.
Teacher: ….

1. I would not correct the student.

2. I would correct the student by explaining that different than is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use different from.

3. I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than different to in this case, and that different from, for instance, could also be correct.

Respectively, the correction options were both adapted to the usage problem in question.

The open-answer scenario, such as (25), provided the respondent with the possibility to give a personal answer.

(25) Teacher: *Let's do this exercise together.*
Student: *I don't think we have the right amount of people!*
Teacher: ….

Consequently, this yielded qualitative results which were used as input for the interview stage of the research, in the sense that I used respondents' answers as a basis for further discussion of a certain topic during the interviews.

This survey methodology is similar to methodologies used by Akurugu (2010) and Ebner (2018) who both used surveys to test hypotheses about usage problems and prescriptivism. Akurugu (2010) used a questionnaire to ask L2 English teachers about their attitudes towards certain usage problems of English grammar. He refers to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (1997) to defend his choice of using a questionnaire to carry out his research. Saunders et al. argue that a questionnaire is an appropriate research method when for example sampling of respondents, a closed-question system and a limited number of questions are involved. Since these three factors apply to the current research as well, a questionnaire is an appropriate research method. Ebner (2018) asked British respondents about whether they accepted usage problems in spoken and written language. She asked them to judge the usage

problems and explain why they came to this judgment. I use a similar approach to request the responses from my respondents. Both approaches are similar in their topic: usage problems and attitudes towards prescriptivism. The context is different; Ebner (2018) targeted native speakers and her respondent type was different. However, the basis of both investigations is comparable.

3.2.2 Usage problem background. The survey dealt with the following ten usage problems from Kamm (2015):

1. *ain't*;
2. *amount/number*;
3. comparative adjectives/adverbs;
4. *different from/than/to*;
5. double negative;
6. *less/fewer*;
7. *none of them was/were*;
8. preposition stranding;
9. singular *they*;
10. split infinitive.

The following section explains the reasons for choosing these usage problems and provides some insight into their background.

The first usage problem, *ain't*, exemplified in (26) and discussed in Section 2.3.2, is an example of a case of standardising prescriptivism.

(26) We ain't happy today.

It is generally agreed upon that *ain't* should not be regarded as Standard English (Kamm, 2015). It is also known as "a symbol of the illiteraci" (O'Connor & Kellerman, 2009, p. 48). However, *ain't* is accepted in many dialects of English around the world. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* – the title of which itself indicates the status of *ain't* – "it is characteristic of the working-class dialects of London and other areas" ("Ain't[1] *verb*"). Furthermore, *ain't* has a special function in the negation system of AAVE (Debose, 1994, p. 128; Weldon, 1994, p. 364). Some examples of how usage guides deal with *ain't* can be found in Table 3 in Section 2.3.2.

Secondly, the approach to dealing with student errors related to *amount* and *number* was tested, another case of standardising prescriptivism. The prescriptive rule is that *amount* is used with uncountable nouns, such as (27), and *number* with countable nouns, as in (28).

(27) What is the correct amount of milk necessary for this cake?

(28) Do you know the number of people in this class?

This usage problem was included in the survey following a suggestion of one of the teachers at the Scala College who comes across problems dealing with this regularly in the classroom and is not mentioned in the HUGE database.

The next usage problem is the use of comparative adjectives and adverbs such as in (29) and (30) below. Like the *amount/number* problem, this usage problem was suggested by one of the participating teachers as well and is not mentioned in the HUGE database either.

(29) Speak slower if someone does not understand you.

(30) Speak more slowly if someone does not understand you.

The rule states that in this case an adverb should be used, since *slowly* modifies the verb. Often, however, an adjective, *slower*, is used. Generally, it seems that 1) according to the general public, using an adjective in this case is a sign of informal language or an informal writing style[10] and that 2) using an adjective in this case is used in many if not all dialects of English (Trudgill, 2016, pp. 97–8). Therefore, this usage problem is a typical case of stylistic prescriptivism. If a teacher corrects the student when they use an adjective, they make the student use formal language in an environment where it may not be appropriate. This makes this usage problem a useful test of prescriptive teaching in the classroom.

After, *different from/than/to* was discussed, another typical case of standardising prescriptivism. The prescriptive rule states that *different from* should be used in Standard British English, as in (31).

[10] E.g. https://www.englishforums.com/English/SlowerOrMoreSlowly/xkgmd/post.htm

(31) This exercise is different from the previous one.

Described by as being all correct options, but different in their usage (Burt, 2000; Kamm, 2015), another usage guide writer, Simon Heffer, calls *different than* an "abomination" (qtd. in Kamm, 2015, p. 164) and therefore prescribes *different from*. In practice, "the use of the … prepositions with different varies with genre, regional differences, and grammatical contexts" (Goh, 2012, Abstract). Furthermore, *different than* seems to become more popular in colloquial English and tends to replace *from* in some contexts (ctd.). Following the trends observed nowadays, it may well be that in a number of decades *different than* will have surpassed *different from* in usage and will therefore have become the standard.

The next usage problem was the double negative, as given in (32), in which "two or more syntactic negations mark a single semantic negation" (Blanchette & Nadeu, 2018, p. 124).

(32) We don't know nobody who can help us with this.

The double negative is regarded as incorrect by many prescriptive usage guides. Heffer (2010) states that "[double negatives] are offences against logic and, if they are an attempt at being funny, they fail" (p. 57). However, the double negative is prevalent in many English dialects and it used to be Standard English in history (Trudgill, 2016, pp. 94–5). Butterfield (2007) states about its current usage that "this sort of negative is widespread in dialect […] and rarely gives rise to confusion as to the intended meaning" (pp. 45–46). Kamm (2015) calls the double negative an intensifier used unambiguously and perfectly sensibly. Nowadays, the double negative has become somewhat stigmatised, mostly under influence of eighteenth-century grammarians such as Robert Lowth (Bryson, 1990; Crystal, 1995; O'Connor & Kellerman, 2009; Blanchette & Nadeu, 2018), and can therefore be classified as stylistic prescriptivism.

A more complicated usage problem is the difference in usage between *less* and *fewer*. The rule prescribes that *less* should be used with uncountable nouns, as in (33), and *fewer* with countable nouns, such as (34).

(33) I think we should get less homework today.

(34) I thought there were fewer students in this class!

Baker first mentioned this rule, in his 1770 publication *Reflections on the English Language etc. etc.* He states that the word *less* "is most commonly used in speaking of a Number; where I should think Fewer would do better" (p. 55). This rule was then, like many others, copied into the usage guides published throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Generally, this usage problem is treated prescriptively in the HUGE database. All usage guides from the twenty-first century prescribe the use of *less* and *fewer* according to the prescriptive rule (Ayto 1995; Burt, 2000; Sayce 2006; Butterfield 2007; Taggart 2010; Heffer 2010). Therefore, this usage problem is another case of standardising prescriptivism. Even Kamm (2015), normally reasonably descriptive in nature, is hesitant, stating that you could sometimes choose to use *less* with count nouns (p. 181). Although he admits that he takes a descriptive stance, he does not use language as strong as with other usage problems he deals with.

None of them was/were was next to be discussed. A typical case of standardising prescriptivism, this usage problem is old: *no one* originates from Old English *nán* and has been used with a singular and plural verb ever since (Butterfield, 2007, p. 111). The general prescriptive tendency here, as explained by Kamm (2015), is that *none* means *no one* and should therefore be treated as singular. The correct form here, consequently, is *none of them was*, as in (35).

(35) I saw many people at that party, but none of them was happy.

However, much discussion and disagreement about whether this is pedantic or 'overdoing it' can be found anywhere in usage guides and language blogs (Kamm, 2015, p. 219). Because of the fact that there is so much disagreement concerning this usage problem, it is very useful to discuss how to treat it in the classroom.

A similar case to the previous usage problem is preposition stranding, which Curzan (2014) categorises as stylistic prescriptivism (pp. 35–36). The prescriptive rule concerning this usage problem is that you should not end a sentence using a preposition, as in (36). However, preposition stranding is now generally regarded common usage. Even Heffer (2010), a generally prescriptive usage guide, states that preposition stranding, as in (36), should in many cases be preferred over its counterpart (37) (pp. 117–118):

(36) It is an event we are greatly looking forward to.

(37) ?It is an event to which we are greatly looking forward.

The survey questions for these usage problems concerned *wh*-questions, typical occurrences of the stranded preposition.

Contrary to all other usage problems, the strategy of posing the questions was different in the open question section. Instead of posing a statement which could trigger a prescriptive response, a statement containing preposition stranding was posed. This was done, because it was hypothesised that posing the question in such a way would trigger a clearer response pattern with which the status of this usage problem could be determined. Using Curzan's strands of prescriptivism, preposition stranding can be called restorative prescriptivism.

The penultimate usage problem discussed was singular *they*: the tendency to avoid having to specify *he* or *she* and instead use *they*, which is genderless (38).

(38) A teacher's life is easy! They only have to grade some tests every week!

Ayto (1995) states that singular *they* is becoming standard (pp. 265–267) and Kamm (2015) simply states that "*they* is the third-person plural pronoun. It is also a singular generic pronoun" (p. 263). Logically and in line with his general attitude, which is fairly prescriptive, Heffer (2010) disagrees, and states that using singular *they* is "illiterate" (p. 199). The question here is when it is appropriate to use singular *they* and when it is not.

In line with this thought, using singular *they* could be described as politically correct prescriptivism in context of Curzan's strands of prescriptivism. Shlasco (2015) states that "using singular they is far more than a way to respect friends who have gender identities outside the binary. Singular *they* has exciting potential to be part of a radical shift in the dominant gender culture" (para. 2) and could be the perfect replacement for the somewhat awkward "he or she", which is still deemed rather sexist because of the masculine pronoun coming first (Zuber & Reed, 1993, p. 520). Additionally, a plethora of English writers have been using singular *they* in this fashion since the sixteenth century. Specifically, the fact that singular *they* has been used extensively for so long, influences the teachers to choose the descriptive option of correcting – if they want to correct it, or even discuss it at all.

The final usage problem surveyed was the split infinitive (8), the separation of the particle *to* and the verb by any adverb or other word. It comes second in Crystal's (1995) "Grammatical Top Ten", ten usage problems most complained about in the English language by grammarians, prescriptivists and usage guide writers (Crystal, 1995, p. 194). Crystal states that in the nineteenth century, using a split infinitive was compared with kniveing oneself (qtd. in Crystal, 1995, p. 195). Currently, the split infinitive is generally accepted by the public and used frequently in popular usage: "To boldly go where no man has gone before", from the Star Trek franchise, is a good example. Furthermore, Pullum (2010) notes that "serious writing in formal style also contains split infinitives" (p. 38), which indicates that the split infinitive is found in academic writing as well. Since the split infinitive is used frequently in both formal and informal writing, this usage problem can be classified as stylistic prescriptivism.

3.2.3 Survey respondent profile. The survey was distributed first at the Scala College, where the interviews were conducted as well. Therefore, a large number of respondents was a teacher at this high school. They teach various levels of higher education in The Netherlands to students ages 12–18. Moreover, they obtained their teaching degrees through either university or hogeschool,[11] or are still in the process of obtaining their degree. Except for one respondent, they are non-native speakers of English. However, no noticeable difference was observed between this respondent and the others, so this difference was not considered while analysing the results.

In total, thirty-four L2 English teachers completed the survey. The population hypothetically consisted of all teachers of English in The Netherlands who were approached via phone or email. The number of respondents is slightly lower than expected. This can be explained by the relatively long survey and the small and specific target group. Albeit few in number, the respondent group is diverse and heterogeneous. They range from young to old teachers, and from highly experienced to novice teachers. Table 4 provides insight into the respondents' profile.

Table 4 *Personal information survey respondents*

Item	**Percentages**
Native speaker	12% yes 88% no
Start teaching	18% before 1980 35% between 1980-2000 47% after 2000
Education	29% hogeschool 59% university 12% not yet obtained

[11] Vocational university

3.2.4 Interview methodology. Following Akurugu's (2010) research methodology, I used the survey answers as input for the second stage: the one-on-one interviews. In total, six L2 English teachers were interviewed. Three of them teach in VWO, and the other three teach in various branches of the VMBO.[12] The choice to involve two levels of education has been made because it allowed for drawing conclusions as to whether the approaches teachers take vary between different teaching levels. The teachers participating are both young and old. The table below specifies some general information about the teachers.

Table 5 *Interview participant information*

No.	Education	Age	Teaching level	Interview date
1	university	61	VWO	12 January 2018
2	hogeschool	48	VMBO	16 January 2018
3	university	28	VWO	16 January 2018
4	hogeschool	34	VMBO	18 January 2018
5	university	36	VWO	25 January 2018
6	hogeschool	62	VMBO	26 January 2018

The interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes, and consisted of a number of questions. However, in line with the qualitative nature of this part of the research, I gave the participants the time and space to explain their opinions and attitudes in detail. The interviews are therefore semi-structured. This combined the advantages of a structured interview with those of a non-structured one: the data was well organised and immediately analysable, while the flexibility provided the opportunity to deviate from the subject matter which led to new, unexpected insights (Atkinson, 2017, p. 70–1). Moreover, I was flexible in the sense that there had to be time to take side tracks whenever the conversations permitted it.

[12] For a definition of VWO and VMBO, see Section 3.1.

The interviews were all structured similarly and consisted of three parts. Firstly, the participants were asked about their knowledge of the different teaching styles in use in the twentieth century, based on Richards and Rogers (1986), to place the questions which followed about prescriptivism and usage problems in that perspective. They were then asked what style they preferred, and whether their opinion differed for various teaching levels and contexts. In answering this question, they were already questioned about their preferences regarding prescriptive or descriptive teaching without them knowing; their preferences for prescriptive teaching or descriptive teaching, namely, could be deduced from their answers to this question.

Secondly, they were asked about the concepts of prescriptivism and descriptivism and whether they were aware of the discussion about usage problems. They were presented with usage problems used in the survey and were asked which ones they recognised, accepted and rejected as correct English usage. Finally, the participants were asked about two usage problems in detail: the split infinitive and the usage of *less* and *fewer*. These usage problems were chosen because of results during the analysis of the survey, as will be explained in Section 4.1.2. Of course, the participants were given the time and space to take side tracks in their explanation. The interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

4 Results

4.1 Survey results

The survey results are presented in the following ways. First, the results of the quantitative, multiple-choice part of the survey are shown. Those are followed by the results of the open questions. Finally, some general remarks made by the respondents are presented. All the results are connected and analysed in the context of the research questions and hypotheses as presented in Section 3.1.

4.1.1 General results. Generally, the percentage of respondents using the descriptive option to discuss the usage problem in question is not used to a great extent. It is used the most with comparative adjectives/adverbs, *different than* and the split infinitive, but only 35% of the respondents used this option at most. A hypothesis for this difference could be that multiple-choice questions in this case – the survey respondents had to choose a way of correction – might have triggered a strong response, so that the respondent was more likely to answer either yes or no. The descriptive option may have seemed to be a more in-between option and may therefore have been overlooked or disregarded by a part of the respondents. Table 6 below presents the multiple-choice question survey results indexed per usage problem discussed and counts the correction percentages: no correction, a correction using a prescriptive approach and a correction using a descriptive approach. The explanation for the three analytical categories presented in this table can be found in Section 3.2.1.

Table 6 *General multiple-choice question results (N=34)*

Item	**% no correction**	**% prescriptive**	**% descriptive**
ain't	0	59	41
amount/number	41	35	24
comparative adjectives/adverbs	24	41	35

different from/than/to	12	53	35
double negative	0	94	6
less/fewer	59	41	0
none of them was/were	88	6	6
preposition stranding	88	0	12
singular *they*	76	6	18
split infinitive	35	29	35

As can be observed in the table, the results were different for every usage problem. Some were not corrected by the majority of the respondents, others were corrected prescriptively, and others were simply discussed by means of a descriptive comment regarding the context of the usage problem in question. The respondents felt the strongest need to correct the student's utterance using a prescriptive approach for the usage problem 'double negative'. On the other hand, the respondents did not correct students using *none of them* with *were* and preposition stranding.

4.1.2 Usage problem results. This section deals with all usage problems individually and combines the results of the multiple-choice part and the open question part of the survey. The answers to the open questions are posed here as statements. The relevant survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

The first usage problem, *ain't,* was corrected by more than half of the respondents using the prescriptive option. The answers to the open question posed in the survey yielded similar results. Answers such as "you should use *aren't*" and "you mean… *aren't*", suggest that *ain't* was not accepted. Other respondents used more descriptive answers, mostly relating to AAVE, such as (39) and (40), but they still judged *ain't* as being incorrect.

(39) Ain't y'all Southern pawdner?

(40) Hmm, so I'm teaching English to American gangsters. That's pretty cool, but in class could we please not say *ain't, gonna* or *wanna*?

The open question answers therefore reflected the multiple-choice answers, as well as the type of error *ain't* represents and the position it takes in second-language education in The Netherlands: it is considered incorrect usage and therefore treated as a usage problem error.

With regards to the *amount/number* usage problem, the respondents of the survey were divided, since 41% chose not to correct the student's utterance and 59% did, of which 35% prescriptively and the other 24% descriptively. The *amount/number* usage problem is another example of standardising prescriptivism since using the rule prescribes a standard usage in British English.

Since the respondents chose not to correct the student's utterance in almost half of the cases, a certain nonchalant attitude towards this usage problem was observed. A similar pattern was also visible in the respondents' answers to the open questions, as exemplified in (41)–(43) below.

(41) That's what they say these days – I still prefer *number*, but never mind... how many people do you need?

(42) Try to think of a way in which you can still do the exercise with a different number of people.

(43) I would not correct this, as it sounds grammatically OK. I would ask however, how many people he needs to do the exercise.

Other respondents simply ignored the usage problem by continuing the lesson without pointing out the error. For instance, one respondent simply said: "OK, let's start" and therefore apparently did not deem the usage problem important enough to mention, as in (44):

(44) Student: *I think we have the right amount of people for this task now.*
Teacher: *OK, let's start!*

A final observation is the fact that compared to *ain't,* this usage problem seems to be less stigmatised; whereas usage of *ain't* was often responded to with humour or references to

Southern American English varieties, no respondent chose this strategy here. Instead, they simply focused on the language itself without any references to cultural stereotypes or jokes.

For the next usage problem, comparative adjectives/adverbs, 41% of the respondents chose a prescriptive correction strategy, and only 24% chose not to correct the student. However, this was not reflected in the open questions, in which the majority of the respondents chose not to correct the student at all.

The results for *different from/than/to* were unexpected, since they did not yet show the development towards flexibility as described in Section 3.2.2. Slightly more than half of the respondents (53%) chose to correct the statement in a prescriptive manner. This could be an indication of the strictness and prescriptive attitudes of the majority of the respondents towards this feature. In this case, the open question answers did reflect the multiple-choice answers, as can be observed in (45)–(47) below. All three examples show that respondents not only noticed the student using *different than*, but indicated they prefer *different from* instead.

(45) From his…

(46) I would wiggle my hand and ask: *different than*?

(47) Different from.

Another correspondence between the multiple-choice and open question answers here is that, with one except, all respondents addressed this issue one way or another, either prescriptively or descriptively.

Continuing onto the next usage problem, the respondents of the survey predominantly judged the double negative as incorrect. All respondents chose to correct the student's utterance containing the double negative, and 94% chose to correct prescriptively. These results made the double negative the most corrected usage problem error of all the usage problems. Like with *ain't*, the stigmatisation of the usage of the double negative caused the respondents to

correct with humour and references to the cultural presence of this usage problem, as illustrated in statements (48)–(50) below.

(48) *You do not have no bike*? See if the pupil hears it, then discuss Old English practice.

(49) I would repeat this in an exaggerated USA accent.

(50) How many noes did you just use?

These results indicate that the double negative is a good example of standardising prescriptivism. The standard here was not met by the student using a double negative, and consequently the respondents used a prescriptive approach to correct the student.

The different responses exemplify to some extent the various teaching styles used by the respondents to deal with the error made by the student; responses such as (48)–(50) are typical of CLT, since they focus on communicating with the student in question. However, some respondents chose responses more linked to the Audiolingual Method; this is the case for (51) and (52).

(51) This is a double negative. I would repeat the sentence using the correct grammar: *I don't have a bike at home*. I would then ask: *do you have a bike at school?* and hope for the correct response.

(52) I would correct him. You should say: *you don't have a bike at home*. Don't and no are double negative.

These responses focus more on grammatical structure than on communicating and therefore follow the rules of teaching the Audiolingual (and comparable) Methods.

The next usage problem, *less/fewer*, shows a clear response pattern: 59% of the respondents chose not to correct the error made, while 41% chose a prescriptive correction. No respondents chose to describe the current situation and base their correction on a descriptive stance.

For clarity, this usage problem was dealt with by means of two open questions. One of the statements contained *less* where, according to the prescriptive rule, there should be *fewer*,

and the other was structured exactly the other way around. The pattern found here reflects Kamm's statement about using *less* with count nouns: the respondents accepted this version to a greater extent than the version in which *fewer* was used with mass nouns, cf. examples (33) and (34). The version with *less* was more often responded to by statements or questions such as those in (53)–(55), making it clear that the respondents did not think this was important enough to deal with at this point.

(53) Very good!

(54) How do you know? Why do you think so?

(55) I would praise them for the point they want to make and continue: *You're right. People have fewer newspapers than before.* Using less incorrectly is a common mistake even for native speakers.

Albeit somewhat extensive, (55) implicitly summarises the general trend concerning this usage problem: it is currently dealt with as being an error, but very few people, both native and non-native, actually understand or want to know exactly how it works.

Fewer, on the other hand, presented some more difficulty for the respondents: *fewer* used with mass nouns seemed to be problematic. The statements in (56)–(58) show that the reactions to *fewer* are significantly stronger than those that use prescriptive correction strategies for *less* with count nouns (cf. examples (53)–(55) above).

(56) I would correct him, because it sounds as wrong, especially to English people. I would say: *You say people have less time, can you give an example?*

(57) That's bad English, I'm afraid. It's not a plural, so use less instead of *few.*

(58) Fewer is incorrect. I would wiggle my hand and ask: *Fewer time?* Using intonation to emphasise my doubt about fewer.

The survey respondents were very clear on the matter of *none of them was/were*: 88% did not correct the student. The open questions reflected these results as well, as can be seen in the examples (59)–(61) below.

(59) Oh dear! That doesn't sound funny at all! What happened?

(60) No correction necessary.

(61) I wouldn't correct this. This is fine. None can be singular or plural.

Most of the respondents chose to ignore the usage problem whatsoever and only commented on the content of the sentence, as in (59). Others used a different strategy and explained that they would not correct it; some added the reason and others do not. Clearly, this usage problem did not trigger a prescriptive response whatsoever.

The results of preposition stranding are similar to those of *none of them was/were*, with again 88% of respondents choosing not to correct. This usage problem is the only usage problem in the list which did not receive any prescriptive corrections on the basis of the multiple-choice data. Therefore, the respondents agreed with the current tendency as described in Section 3.2.2 and did not think using preposition stranding required correction in a prescriptive manner.

In the open-question part of the survey several comments were made about the old-fashioned nature of sentences which do not use a stranded preposition. Other respondents chose to ignore the error, comparable to earlier discussed usage problems, such as *none of them was/were* and *less/fewer*. However, most of them corrected the sentence to include a stranded preposition and changed it, with or without comment, such as (62)–(64).

(62) You mean: *who are you talking to?*

(63) Who are you talking to.....

(64) I would correct him because this sounds Dunglish: I would say: *Now that I have your attention: you got the word order wrong, Dunglish! So, who am I talking to? To you of course!?*

Not only do all of the examples above prove that the stranded preposition was judged as being correct English, but this is taken one step further: they wanted their students to use preposition stranding in this case.

Although only being slightly more corrected than the previous two usage problems, singular *they* triggered more descriptive corrections (18%). In the open-question section, it became evident that singular *they* is accepted as Standard British English, since the majority of the respondents chose not to correct or even mention singular *they* in their response to the student's utterance.

Finally, the split infinitive was corrected prescriptively by 29% of the respondents and descriptively by 35% of the respondents. The commonness of the split infinitive was reflected in the answers to the open question in the survey: no respondent chose to correct the student using a split infinitive in one way or another. They all either commented "no correction", or chose to continue the dialogue in the classroom without mentioning anything. The reasons for this difference are mentioned in the discussion section later in this thesis.

In Section 5 the results will be discussed in the context of the background literature and their applicability in education practices.

4.2 Interview results

4.2.1 Part one: teaching styles from Richards and Rogers (1986). The first part of the interview was aimed at creating the context for the later specific parts about prescriptivism and usage problems. The participants' awareness of the history of teaching styles was questioned through a number of general questions. Importantly, the participants were free to answer in the way they saw fit and there was opportunity of side tracks and follow-up questions whenever necessary. The results of this stage of the interviews can be divided into three general topics. Firstly, the results to the question of the participants' awareness of the change in teaching styles will be discussed. Following is an overview of the opinions of the participants regarding frontal teaching, in which a teacher only teaches by standing in front of the class and by giving instructions during the lessons, and finally some insights will be provided into the participants' answers concerning what could be called a decline of teaching grammar rules to students.

All six participants responded positively to the question whether they were aware of teaching style changes in the twentieth century, based on Richards and Rogers (1986). The older teachers, participants 1 and 6,[13] were able to reflect on their own lengthy careers to answer this question. They explained that when they started their respective careers, in the 1970s, they were used to teaching by means of Grammar-Translation and Direct Instruction (based on the Direct Method), and commented that the standard has changed over time. The younger teachers either drew from research they had read for their respective educational tracks, or were able to guess the change from their own experiences as teachers. Being aware of the educational developments at the Scala College, as discussed in Section 3.2.3, the participants were able to relate these to the question I posed about their awareness of changing teaching styles. Generally, the description of the change by the participants corresponds in detail to the change

[13] See Table 5 in Section 3.2.4 for interview participant details

from Audiolingual and Grammar-Translation education to CLT. The participants in this context mentioned four of the six important changes as described in Table 1: 1) the focus on meaning, 2) learning to communicate, 3) interaction is key, and 4) learning by making errors in communication.

The next question related to teaching styles concerned the participants' opinions and current practice regarding these different teaching styles. All six participants commented on the importance of communication during their lessons. They all explained that they used strategies to look beyond explaining grammar-rules: they wanted students to talk to each other. When asked how they preferred to explain new grammar to a group of students, there was a difference between VWO and VMBO teachers. The VWO teachers, participants 1, 3 and 5 in Table 5, all used texts from the teaching books to have the students elicit the rules from these texts. In addition, they commented that they teach this relatively classically and frontally. However, even some of the VWO teachers, in the light of recent changes, call frontal teaching "contaminated", meaning that nowadays, teaching classically without any dynamic student-teacher relation is regarded old-fashioned. On the other hand, the VMBO teachers stated they frequently use audio or video files as a supporting teaching method to explain to the students when the grammar items are actually used in the language; a very important feature of CLT. Respectively, this shows that there exist many opinions about how to teach ideally.

Finally, concerning teaching grammar, all participants commented on the fact that they have witnessed a gradual decline in the importance of teaching grammar to L2 students. One of the participants described the change from Grammar-Translation teaching in 1981 to cooperative, student-centred teaching in 2018. She commented that "back in those days [teaching] was focused on reproduction and writing down things. […] It wasn't about teaching skills". She continued by stating that "communication is what you should do", so she prefers the current communicative teaching trend. Another participant even called grammar "the

superimposition of patterns within a language which change continuously". He expressed his aversion to teaching grammar as a goal by stating that he would rather have students use the 'wrong' tense if they are able to explain why they use that respective tense, than prescribing what students should be doing at all times. This is exactly what the second part of the interview was about: the discussion between prescriptive and descriptive teaching, as will be explained in Section 4.2.2.

Concluding, it can be said that the interview participants are aware of the changes in history regarding teaching styles. This immediately affects the discussion about descriptivism and prescriptivism, since those two concepts are linked to the teaching styles discussed above. More importantly, by being aware of the options they have to teach certain usage problems to their students, teachers can make well-advised choices in the classroom.

4.2.2 Part two: descriptivism vs. prescriptivism in second-language teaching. The main part of the interview was about prescriptive and descriptive teaching strategies. Similar to part one, the participants were asked about their awareness of this discussion and its background. After being explained the terms 'prescriptive', 'descriptive', and 'usage problem', the participants were able to place this discussion in the context of their own teaching practice. A number of findings concerning the attitudes towards using a prescriptive approach while teaching L2 students will be discussed below.

The first finding of this part of the interview stage was the dilemma between using a prescriptive approach and focusing on communication. Contrary to the hypothesis put forward in Section 3.1, most participants had a rather negative attitude towards teaching using a prescriptive approach. Most importantly, according to the participants, "communication is key". They all preferred communication more than teaching correct, Standard English rules when they would come across usage problems such as the split infinitive, *amount/number* or *less/fewer*. This is exemplified by the illustrative statements given in (65) and (66) below.

(65) I always ask myself: what does this assignment want to communicate? Or, what does the student want to communicate?

(66) I'm against the concept of prescriptivism in principle: prescribing rules for a changing language never wins.

Participant 6 used an example to share her opinion on this topic. She stated that if a Dutch student wants to go abroad to London and wants to tell time, they should not say "a quarter past eight", but they should say "eight fifteen". This is the language their peers use in England. However, teaching books, according to participant 6, instruct teachers to explain telling time using this formal language. Consequently, communicating will actually be more difficult after the students have been taught this language feature.

Participant 4 confirmed this by stating that she mostly ignores usage problem errors made by students, since correcting them may result in shy students unwilling to speak English. She stated that no usage problem from the list presented would bother her to such a degree that she would decide to correct the student: "It's very important that the student is able and willing to express themselves using the right content". She continued by offering a descriptive approach to teaching: during a role play exercise, she walks through the classroom and collect the language her students use. This descriptive approach is an example of her sensibility to language variation.

The VMBO teachers followed this reasoning and took their students' level into consideration and what exactly they would need to be able to do with the knowledge they have obtained. This is more about being understood than about anything else. Participant 2, for instance, stated that he always uses many relatable examples to aid the students in studying different grammatical forms. According to this participant, it is essential to take a descriptive approach, since this way they will remember more of what you have taught. In response to the question whether he would correct prescriptive usage problem errors, he stated: "I'd tell them

language changes and that the people who use the language are responsible for this change". Again, "it's more important to communicate".

However, there are certain parts of the curriculum in which prescriptive corrections should be used. Participant 1, 3, and 5, all working in VWO education, shared that when correcting for instance writing tests, they would correct the usage problems as written down in the list provided. They would do this because it is important to educate the VWO students in such a way that they know formal Standard English: they would need to use this later in university education. Generally, the purpose of learning English was a central factor in deciding whether descriptive or prescriptive correction strategies were applied. Participant 5 gave an example of a student who wants to work for the European Parliament; being able to write and speak correct and Standard English would be essential in that case. Therefore, he would help the student to avoid usage problem errors by correcting them in his school assignments. Participant 3 added that when it comes to testing there are certain standards which need to be upheld. That is why she would correct "all small mistakes". Importantly, she added that she uses this strategy because it "is included in our lesson system", which indicates that lesson content is dependent on decisions made top-down.

Taking both sides of the discussion about communication into account, communication is key upon deciding on the goal of a certain lesson or curriculum. If the lesson is focused on teaching a prescriptive rule, the participants were more likely to use a prescriptive approach while teaching this rule. This sounds rather logical. Otherwise, if the lesson is focused on other aspects of the language, prescriptivism is not that important.

The key element of this dilemma between teaching using a prescriptive approach and the importance of being able to communicate is context. In Section 4.1.1 it was stated that in the survey stage of the research the participants were more likely to correct the usage problem error while answering the multiple-choice questions than while answering the open questions.

The participants of the interview stage were asked about why this would be, and they saw similarities between lesson goals and the survey questions.

On the one hand, the multiple-choice questions did have a specific context, and were focused on correcting an error. Moreover, the error in question was pointed out to the participants. Participant 5 commented that "in a certain context, your most extreme opinion would decide your answer". This would mean that in the multiple-choice section of the survey, participants were forced towards giving a certain answer. Similarly, in a lesson which is focused on teaching grammar or certain language features, a teacher would be more likely to correct usage problem errors. Participant 3 confirmed this line of thought: "maybe if we're talking about a specific subject, I would correct the student". On the other hand, the open questions did not have any context and were therefore not focused on correction per se. This could be compared with lessons concerning the development of speaking or conversational skills, which would trigger different or no corrections, according to participants 2, 4, 5 and 6.

As an example of the difference between multiple-choice and open questions, the split infinitive was discussed in some more detail. The interview participants all confirmed that they did not always regard the split infinitive as an error whatsoever while discussing the open questions. However, when confronted with a sentence containing a split infinitive accompanied by multiple-choice answers, they were more likely to acknowledge the error and have an opinion about it. This could be an indication of the acceptance of the split infinitive in the English language. If the only context in which the split infinitive is corrected is a controlled one (by means of multiple-choice answers), this grammatical feature apparently does not trigger much response in general conversation. This difference is typical of the discussion about communication: wherever the lesson goal is not focused on teaching a certain grammatical feature, usage problems such as the split infinitive are corrected less often.

After the discussion about the importance of communication, the interview focused on error types, and specifically on the contrast between a competence L2-learner error and usage problem errors. This was exemplified during the interview by means of (67).

(67) *I buyed a car yesterday.

This irregular past simple tense error was juxtaposed with the usage problem errors from the usage problem list. The question here was whether the participants would treat those errors differently if they were made in their classrooms. Generally, this again was relative to the goal and purpose of the lesson in question. Participant 2 indicated that this error is different from the ones on the list, but does not indicate whether he thinks the one is more important than the other. Participant 4 indicated that if a student would say "buyed" where "bought" was appropriate, she would be in a dilemma if the purpose of the lesson was anything else than teaching the students the past simple. When asked if she thought there was a difference between this error and those on the list she stated: "It depends on what the effect is. I think it's very nice when [the students] try to speak English, so these things are less important".

On the contrary, participant 1 tended to disagree. She thought that the errors on the list were more semantic than concerned with grammar, and called them "real, severe mistakes". Therefore, she judged them differently than the usage problems from the list provided. However, in coming to a general conclusion, she stated: "The mistakes with which you are labelled as being lowly educated count heaviest for me. It has to do with how you come across when you speak". Participant 3 agreed with her in the sense that she thought she should be strict concerning grammar. Following this reasoning, she would choose to correct both the competence L2-learner error as the usage problem error. To conclude, not all participants agreed on how to treat these errors, but it is clear that, at least for a part, there is a difference between competence L2-learner errors and usage problem errors, and especially in the way they are treated in the classroom.

Finally, participant 5 shed a light on his view of the future for L2-learning. Considering that the teaching trend has become more descriptive over the course of the last century, he projected that eventually teachers will let go of the idea of teaching Standard English to our students. The ultimate goal, according to him, will be to prepare the students for a world of communicating in English. This means we should not teach standard pronunciation, standard style rules and standard grammar rules anymore. The only thing we should do is expose the students to as many variations of the English language as possible to enable them to develop their own. This descriptive way of teaching will lead to the eventual development of world citizens speaking their own version of the English tongue, multiple intelligibly.

In conclusion, the interview participants mostly confirmed the survey results. They indicated that the context of certain usage problem errors is essential to their reactions. Additionally, the goal of the lesson adds to their decision as well. If this goal is to teach grammar in the most controlled way possible, the participants were more likely to use a prescriptive approach while correcting their students. If the goal of the lesson was none other than teaching their students to communicate, usage problem errors are deemed unimportant. Importantly, however, the interview reactions were slightly less strict than the survey results, in the sense that the interview participants indicated that they tend to ignore usage problem errors in more context than the survey respondents.

5 Discussion

The results of the study yielded a number of findings. Those findings are discussed here in the context of the background to this study and other relevant background issues.

Firstly, stigmatisation of certain usage problems resulted in a clear pattern of prescriptive responses. Two examples of such usage problems are *ain't* and the double negative. Since certain associations deem these forms nonstandard or even banal or rude. *Ain't*, for example, is, as described earlier, associated with AAVE and therefore regarded as non-standard British English. In accordance with this background knowledge, it is perfectly logical why respondents of this survey tend to correct the student's utterance containing *ain't* using a prescriptive approach: they want to teach Standard British English to their students (Oostdam & Van Toorenburg, 2002, p. 8; Holdinga, 2007, p. 33). The same is true for the double negative, which triggers a similar response.

Other usage problems, such as *amount/number*, are much less stigmatised and are therefore corrected less prescriptively than the aforementioned usage problems which are. Logically, the difference in perception causes teachers to take other approaches when the factor of stigmatisation is involved. They want students to be able to be professionals while speaking English and therefore choose to shield them from as much negative reactions to their language use as possible.

Another finding was that some of the results seemed to be context dependent. Responses to the same usage problem tended to vary across the different contexts in which usage problems were presented; this variation was sometimes identified in the answers by one and the same respondent. Generally, the pattern shows that in language-specific context where the respondent was directed towards the usage problem in question, i.e. the multiple-choice questions, the usage problems were corrected more prescriptively than in the open questions. Moreover, in the interview questions, a prescriptive approach was mentioned even less. The

latter gave the respondents more room for thought and therefore they were less adamant to judge the usage problems as incorrect.

This discussion is related to formality as well. It could be suggested that multiple-choice questions, in this response structure, trigger more formal results and therefore also trigger more prescriptive results; the survey respondents and interview participants indicated to use a more prescriptive approach in formal contexts than they would in informal contexts such as simple classroom conversations. Since multiple-choice prevent the respondents from creating their own context, these questions are treated more formally than open questions, where the context can be filled in by the respondents themselves.

Albeit a direct result of the survey, this pattern could also have blurred the results to a certain degree. The bias here is that the result is being predicted by the nature of the question provided. This can be observed in the answers for the split infinitive; the same student utterance triggered different responses in the multiple-choice and open questions. This difference could have a number of reasons. The most probable one is the aforementioned bias: the respondents were directed towards the problem in the multiple-choice questions: they knew what the question was about. In that case, a correction is made more quickly than when there are no answering possibilities provided. A significant percentage of the respondents, however, chose not only to describe the nature of a split infinitive, but also to correct it in a prescriptive way. It would have been expected that those respondents would have corrected the split infinitive in the open question as well.

The third point of discussion is the relevance of the teaching styles as described by Richards and Rogers (1986) in the handbook discussed in an earlier chapter. Clearly, responses to the open questions varied greatly not only depending on the usage problem, but also depending on the respondents themselves. The responses can be linked to a certain teaching style. A response using a lot of examples and communicative strategies, for instance, is a clear

example of CLT, while a response based on the grammatical rule depicts characteristics of the Direct Approach. Since the interview participants indicated to be aware of the different styles, their history and their characteristics, the link between their answers and the respective theoretical background can be made. The double negative shows this pattern since various respondents chose contradicting strategies to correct the students. The teachers using a style in which they correct their student the grammatical rule by explaining what it is and how it works use a more old-fashioned, but direct approach, while others, who insist on eliciting the correct language from the students, using examples or getting the answers needed through communication, use elements of CLT. This therefore illustrates the fact that multiple teaching methods are still used in The Netherlands by different teachers who all teach the same subject matter to the same students. The question that arises here is whether it would be ideal for all teachers to use the same teaching style at all times, since this may result in more clarity for each student. However, since all teachers teach differently, this may not ever be achieved.

Following this reasoning about different styles, various levels of teaching ask for different teaching styles as well. As described before, teachers from two different levels of teaching were asked about their views: the VWO and the VMBO. It became apparent that teaching styles, according to the interview participants, should be different for these two levels. It is generally understood that a more direct, grammar-focused teaching style fits VWO students better: they are able to focus and listen for a longer period of time. Moreover, they are able to analyse certain patterns in more depth than VMBO students are, since this skill is what is expected of them in preparatory university education. Education for VMBO students, however, should be focused more on communication and prepare them for using English in their daily lives.

Therefore, the difference between VMBO and VWO teachers here could be an indication of what the students eventually have to be able to do with what they have learnt.

VMBO students have to be able to communicate, while VWO students not only have to do that, but also have to be able to use English as a language in university contexts. The different teaching styles as described before reflect this division: communication should be the primary teaching style to teach students who eventually need to communicate, while a style like the Direct Method or even Grammar-Translation applies to students who need to use English in a more academic environment.

The final and most important topic that needs clarification is the topic of awareness and relevance. From the results of the survey and during the interviews, it became apparent that not all respondents were aware of some of the usage problems. This caused problems for the research since the respondents were not able to answer any of the related questions as a result. A usage problem this applies to is *less/fewer*. Not all of the respondents were aware of the discussion regarding the usage of these words and therefore did not know how to respond to the open questions posed in the survey. Consequently, they ignored the usage problem whatsoever. In itself, this is a vital finding of the research: not all teachers are aware of usage problems they deal with in the classroom. Another example is the usage problem *none of them was/were*, of which the relevance was questioned by a number of respondents. They indicated that they did not know this was a problem at all. The interview participants confirmed this by stating that they would not pay attention to this were this to be uttered by one of their students. Consequently, the question arises whether this should be considered a usage problem at all. A third and final example is preposition stranding, which in itself has changed from being a usage problem to the new standard in some contexts according to a majority of the respondents.

This then raises a question of relevance. If some of these usage problems are not viewed as actual problems by teachers, what does this mean for the relevance of discussing these problems? A choice then has to be made: should teachers be informed about these usage problems so that they can teach them to their students, or should usage problems, or at least,

some of them, be ignored and therefore overlooked. This may seem counterproductive from a prescriptive point of view, but may as well be the right strategy for teaching at present.

6 Conclusion

This thesis has explored whether L2 teachers use a prescriptive approach to correct the usage problem errors their students make. Moreover, it has shed some light on the attitude L2 English teachers have towards teaching using a prescriptive approach in the classroom. It has presented two a twofold methodology: a survey and interviews. It has provided an answer to a number of research questions after placing the current research in the context of the history of second-language teaching in The Netherlands and the different strands of prescriptivism as described by Curzan (2014). This section will describe the conclusions that can be drawn from this research.

This thesis presented the results to two main research questions concerning the teaching practices and attitudes of L2 teachers in The Netherlands who teach English to Dutch students in high schools across the country. The first research question focused on the attitude towards using a prescriptive approach while correcting usage problem errors in the classroom. This was investigated with a survey containing multiple-choice and open questions directed at L2 English teachers from The Netherlands. Generally, the multiple-choice question results present a clear image of a descriptive teaching practice. All but two of the tested usage problems, *ain't* and the double negative, were responded to using a descriptive approach by the absolute majority of the respondents, or remained uncorrected or ignored whatsoever.

Surprisingly, these results do not confirm the hypothesis formulated at the outset. Instead of the predicted use of a prescriptive approach, respondents used descriptive tactics to correct the usage problem errors or did not correct them at all. The respondents either thought that the usage problem errors were not severe enough to correct or did not think the usage problem errors presented in the survey were errors at all. As stated, two of the usage problems did trigger prescriptive responses.

Evidently, being able to communicate is much more important than using these usage problems correctly, according to the respondents. This conclusion can be drawn from the responses to the open questions posed in the survey. Many of the respondents, on multiple occasions, ignored the usage problem error and focused on continuing a conversation, lesson or dialogue instead of focusing on correcting 'useless' grammar. Doing this was referred to as "teaching the language of their parents or grandparents" (Participant 5, Personal communication, 26 January 2018) or "taking away the students' courage to talk" (Participant 4, Personal communication, 18 January 2018). Therefore, this was often avoided or done at another occasion when it did not interrupt the lesson focused on teaching a certain skill. Additionally, the interview participants made it very clear that teaching a certain grammar item to their students was never the priority; this did not only apply to usage problem errors, but also to competence L2-learner errors.

An underlying question was posed to investigate whether teachers use a less prescriptive approach while teaching VMBO or VWO. The above-mentioned data and conclusion can be used to answer this question as well. Generally, both VMBO teachers and VWO teachers value using a descriptive approach in the classroom most. However, a difference between the two levels of education is visible on thorough inspection of the interview results. It becomes evident that in the case of VWO teachers, there is an extra layer of motivation for using a prescriptive approach. Whereas for VMBO teachers the language used remains descriptive in most, if not all, domains of learning and the classroom, and the attitude towards teaching with a prescriptive approach is generally negative in all contexts, VWO teachers take a different approach when the future careers of their students is considered. Preparatory university education requires a certain level of formal English necessary to be able to write and work in higher education wherever in the world. This reflects teaching practices in the classroom focused on formal writing or speaking environments. In those cases, VWO teachers

take a more prescriptive approach to teaching and use a more prescriptive approach to teach their students how to speak and write formal English.

This data can also be used for providing an answer to the second research question, which was focused on teachers' attitudes towards using a prescriptive approach to teach their students. Similar to stated before, teaching prescriptively was mostly regarded as old-fashioned, stickler-like and exaggerated. Most importantly, teachers feared that when they would correct their students making these errors, it would result in a gradual loss of confidence, which would cause the student to lose their will to talk and participate in the lessons. However, this does not mean grammar education is not important. A teacher's attitude can shape a student's confidence and willingness to learn. When a teacher takes into consideration that a) teaching grammar is important, because "children … need to know how to write well, and spell and punctuate" (Kamm, 2015, p. 10), but also that b) usage problem error often originate from "misguided rules … [which are] of no use to anyone and should not be inculcated in a new generation" (ctd.), they can prepare a student in the best way possible for the world yet to come. They will know how to present themselves in correct English when necessary, but they will not be judged for using old-fashioned, overly formal language that is not expected of a non-native speaker of our lingua franca.

7 Bibliography

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Appendix A

MA Linguistics survey

Introduction

Q6 Dear participant,
Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. My name is Boudewijn Steenhof, an MA Linguistics student at Leiden University. I am currently doing my master's thesis on English prescriptivism and teaching prescriptive rules. As a part of this research, I have created this survey to collect data on teachers' attitudes towards dealing with English language usage problems in the classroom.

The survey consists of two parts. In the first part, you will be presented with hypothetical classroom situations: conversations which could take place in your classroom. Every time, the conversation will be between a teacher and a student, both speaking once. The aim of this survey is to collect the teacher's statement to the student's response.
In the second part you will be asked to fill out some personal information. This information will not be shared and is only meant for statistical and correlational analysis.
Again, thank you for filling out this survey. If you have any questions or remarks about the survey or the research in general, please do not hesitate to contact me by sending an e-mail to boudewijnsteenhof@gmail.com.

Open questions

Q30 For the following questions you will be asked to write a response to the statements. It is very important that you try to use the exact words you would use if this were to happen in the classroom. Please start answering by indicating whether you would correct the student or not. Then continue by stating why, and how you would correct the student. And if you would, please write down what your response would be exactly.

It is impossible to anticipate exactly which words you would use while correcting this student. Therefore, I would like you to choose the answer which resembles your response most. Please do take a moment to think about these questions if you are unsure, and eventually decide on an answer which you can relate to.

- Q16 (usage problem: *ain't*)
    - Teacher: I sometimes listen to Justin Bieber's music.
    - Student: Ain't you too old for that?
    - Teacher: ….

- Q17 (usage problem: split infinitive)
    - Teacher: Why aren't you paying attention?
    - Student: It's difficult to actually hear what you're saying.
    - Teacher: …

- Q18 (usage problem: *different from/than/to*)
  - Teacher: Do you have the same answers?
  - Student: No, I think my answers are different than his.
  - Teacher: ….

- Q19 (usage problem: double negative)
  - Teacher: Do you have a bike at home?
  - Student: No, I don't have no bike at home.
  - Teacher: …

- Q20 (usage problem: *none of them was/were*)
  - Teacher: Did you have fun at football practice yesterday?
  - Student: No! There were a lot of people there, but none of them were nice!
  - Teacher: ….

- Q21 (usage problem: preposition stranding)
  - Teacher: Can you please pay attention?
  - Student: Excuse me, but to who are you talking?
  - Teacher: ….

- Q22 (usage problem: *amount/number*)
  - Teacher: Let's do this exercise together.
  - Student: I don't think we have the right amount of people!
  - Teacher: ….

- Q23 (usage problem: comparative adjectives/adverbs)
  - Teacher: Okay, could you do this exercise in under 5 minutes?
  - Student: I think it can be done quicker!
  - Teacher: ….

- Q24 (usage problem: *less/fewer*)
  - Teacher: Can you think of a difference between the 60s and now?
  - Student: People now have fewer time than before.
  - Teacher: ….

- Q33 (usage problem: *less/fewer*)
  - Teacher: Can you think of a difference between the 60s and now?
  - Student: People now have less newspapers than before.
  - Teacher: ….

Multiple-choice questions

Q31 For these following questions you will be asked to choose between certain options. There will be three options every time:

- I would not correct this student.
- I would correct this student by explaining that X is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use Y.
- I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than X in this case, and that Y, for instance, could also be correct.

I am aware of the fact that your preferred response might be something else than the three options provided. If that is the case, please choose the one you can agree with the most.

- Q4 (usage problem: *ain't*)
    - Teacher: Please complete the following exercise by filling in the correct form of to be: I ..... happy today.
    - Student: I ain't happy today.
    - Teacher:
        - I would not correct the student
        - I would correct the student by explaining that *ain't* is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use am not.
        - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than *ain't* in this case, and that *am not,* for instance, could also be correct.

- Q5 (usage problem: split infinitive)
    - Teacher: What do you think is the most important thing in life?
    - Student: To really be happy!
    - Teacher:
        - I would not correct the student
        - I would correct the student by explaining that splitting an infinitive is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should say *to be really happy*.
        - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than *really* could be placed after *be.*

- Q7 (usage problem: *different from/than/to*)
    - Teacher: Do you think these pictures are the same?
    - Student: No, the one is different than the other.
    - Teacher:
        - I would not correct the student.
        - I would correct the student by explaining that *different than* is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use *different from*.

        - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than *different than* in this case, and that *different from*, or *different to*, could also be correct.

- Q8 (usage problem: double negative)
    - Teacher: Do you know Harry?
    - Student: No, I don't know nobody named Harry!
    - Teacher:
        - I would not correct the student.
        - I would correct the student by explaining that a double negative is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use *don't know anybody*.
        - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than *don't know nobody* in this case, and that *don't know anybody*, for instance, could also be correct.

- Q9 (usage problem: *none of them was/were*)
    - Teacher: How many of your friends were at the concert yesterday?
    - Student: None of them were there! We all missed it.
    - Teacher:
        - I would not correct the student.
        - I would correct the student by explaining that *none of them were* is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use *none was*.
        - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than *none of them were* in this case, and that *none was*, for instance, could also be correct.

- Q10 (usage problem: preposition stranding)
    - Teacher: What can you ask if you don't know where someone put something?
    - Student: Who did you give it to?
    - Teacher:
        - I would not correct the student.
        - I would correct the student by explaining that preposition stranding is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use *to whom*...
        - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than this in this case, and that *to whom did you give it?* for instance, could also be correct.

- Q11 (usage problem: *amount/number*)

  - Teacher: How should you calculate the population density of the United Kingdom?
  - Student: You have to divide the amount of people by the surface area.
  - Teacher:
    - I would not correct the student.
    - I would correct the student by explaining that you should use *amount* with uncountable things and *number* with countable things.
    - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities in this case, and that saying *number of people*, for instance, could also be correct.

- Q12 (usage problem: comparative adjectives/adverbs)
  - Teacher: What can you do when you don't understand someone?
  - Student: You can ask him to speak slower.
  - Teacher:
    - I would not correct the student.
    - I would correct the student by explaining that using *slower* like this is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use *slowly*.
    - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities in this case, and that more *slowly*, for instance, could also be correct.

- Q13 (usage problem: *less/fewer*)
  - Teacher: Can you think of a difference between the 60s and now?
  - Student: People have fewer coins, and instead use credit cards.
  - Teacher:
    - I would not correct the student.
    - I would correct the student by explaining that using *fewer* like this is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use *less*.
    - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities in this case, and that *less*, for instance, could also be correct.

- Q15 (usage problem: singular *they*)
  - Teacher: I'm sorry, I haven't been able to grade your tests yet.
  - Student: Why not? The life of a teacher is easy! They don't have to do much at all!
  - Teacher:
    - I would not correct the student
    - I would correct the student by explaining that using *they* for singular is ungrammatical and shouldn't be used; instead, one should use *he or she.*
    - I would tell the student that there are more possibilities than saying *they* in this case, and that *he or she*, for instance, could also be correct.

Personal information

Q32 Finally, please answer these personal questions. Your answers will only be used for statistical and correlational purposes.

- Q28 Are you a native speaker of English?
  - Yes
  - No

- Q24 When did you start working as an English teacher in high school?
  - Before 1980
  - Between 1980 and 2000
  - After 2000

- Q27 In total, how many years have you been working as an English teacher?

- Q25 Where did you obtain your teacher's degree?
  - Hogeschool
  - University
  - Other, namely:
  - I haven't obtained my teacher's degree yet.

- Q29 Do you have any remarks or questions about the survey or the research in general?

Appendix B

Interview questions

Thank you for taking part in this interview. There will be a number of questions on three different topics:

1. Style of teaching compared to Richards & Rogers's overview of teaching methods

What do you think are the most important strategies you use while you teach English?
Do you focus more on communicative teaching or on teaching grammar rules? And why?
Does your strategy differ for different levels of teaching, and why?

2. Attitude towards usage problems and teaching prescriptively

Are you aware of the concept of prescriptivism? If yes, could you explain what it is?
Are you aware of the concept of descriptivism? If yes, could you explain what it is?
Do you know what is meant by **a usage problem**? And if yes, could you name a few?
Here is a list of usage problems. Which ones do you accept as correct English, and which ones don't you? Do you have any idea why?
If you'd have a student making these mistakes, what would be, according to you, the best strategy to deal with this mistake? Does the strategy differ were the student from a different age or level at school, or the context of the lesson?
Do you think teaching books should discuss these usage problems? If yes, why and how? If no, why not?

3. Specific usage problems:

    a. Split infinitive

What do you know about the split infinitive? Can you think of an example where you wouldn't accept a split infinitive?

    b. Less/fewer

When would you accept different usages of less/fewer with countable and uncountable nouns? Could you give some examples? Which ones do you accept, and which ones not? Why?

Do you have any other comments about the topic of prescriptivism or the methodology of this research? I'd love to hear them!

Thank you for taking part in this interview.