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Feedback and error correction

Overview

- 12.1 **Error correction.** Some basic issues.
- 12.2 **Learner preferences.** Whether and how students like to be corrected.
- 12.3 **Oral correction.** Various techniques used for correction of oral work in class, and some indication of which are more, or less, effective.
- 12.4 **Written correction.** Suggestions for how samples of student writing may be corrected.

12.1 Error correction: some basic issues

The term *error correction*

I am using the term *error correction* here in its conventional sense to refer to what a teacher does when indicating to the learner when they have said or written a form that is considered an error by the standards of acceptability of international English (see **1 Teaching English today**) and helping them to correct it. Researchers mostly prefer to use the more precise term *corrective feedback*, since the word *correction* assumes that the error has in fact been corrected, whereas this is not necessarily the case: the learner may continue to make the error. In this book, I'll use mostly the more common, conventional term *error correction*, while bearing in mind that such correction, from the learner's point of view, may be only temporary, or may not be perceived at all: the term refers primarily to the written or spoken input of the teacher.

Is error correction effective?

Most teachers assume that error correction is a natural and necessary component of the language teaching/learning process, as do students. However, there are some who cast doubts on its effectiveness (e.g., Truscott, 1999), based on the fact that learners often continue to make the same mistakes after being corrected (more on this below). Krashen (2002) says that error correction only helps conscious learning and does not have much lasting effect on permanent language acquisition. The general consensus today, however, is that error correction does contribute to proficiency (see, for example, the introduction to the collection of papers on the topic edited by Nassaji and Kartchava, 2021).

Do learner errors derive from L1 interference?

In learning their first language, learners have no competing language, and their mistakes therefore will be a result of what they know, or don't know, of the language so far. For

example, they may over-generalize rules (e.g., **goed* instead of *went*). As they hear the correct forms more and more, these will naturally take over, and conscious correction is not necessary (although it is sometimes supplied by, for example, parents talking to their children). However, second-language learners are already fluent in one language. So unless they are aware of the differences, they may sometimes unconsciously apply an L1 usage which is not appropriate for the second language (*interference*). For example, a French speaker may say something like, *We drink always coffee*. This word order is perfectly acceptable in French, but not in English; and some learners may never notice that English orders the words differently unless their attention is drawn to it. Many learner errors are indeed rooted in L1 interference, but not all; others are derived from issues within the target language itself, such as the example of over-generalization mentioned above. Yet others result from the natural tendency to simplify, especially in real-time speech production: for example, the omission of auxiliary verbs (**I playing*) even when the learner's first language has an equivalent which uses the corresponding auxiliary (e.g., Spanish, *estoy jugando*).

Is there a difference between an *error* and a *mistake*?

A theoretical distinction is sometimes made between an *error* – an unacceptable form which the learner regularly makes because they do not know a rule, or have internalized it wrongly – and a *mistake* – a slip, which the learner could in fact have avoided with a little more thought. So in principle, a learner should be able to self-correct a mistake, but needs input in order to correct an error. But the two are difficult to distinguish when they actually occur, and the distinction, therefore, does not help us very much in practice.

Are errors an indication of a failure in learning or teaching?

No. It's true that the word *error* has a negative connotation, which leads us to assume it is somehow bad. But in fact errors are an inevitable and essential component of good learning (of anything), and their detection and correction can contribute to the learning process. There is even a suggested procedure for grammar teaching (the so-called *garden-path* technique), based on inciting learners to make errors in order to help them learn by drawing their attention to the correction. Errors, therefore, should not be condemned, but accepted as a natural and positive aspect of the development of the new language, and the correction offered as a basis for further progress.

What is the goal of error correction?

The main goal of error correction is to prevent mistakes from becoming entrenched, whether they are rooted in interference from the first language or in some tricky feature within English itself. So when we correct a student's error, our goal is to make them aware of what was wrong and what the correct form should have been so that the same error can be avoided in future. The process is a very conscious one: it involves explicit thinking about the language rather than just using it for communication. Sometimes the goal may be wider: to use one student's mistake as a basis for teaching the whole class a language point, and thus to anticipate and possibly prevent similar mistakes by others.

Why do learners often continue to make errors after being corrected?

Error correction does not necessarily produce either immediate or consistent results. Many teachers are familiar with the situation that they correct a student in one lesson – and then see them making precisely the same mistake in the next! Were they not listening? Did they not understand? Why don't they remember? One reason may be that they have understood the correct form consciously, and can get it right if they think about it – but in hasty writing or in speech they may not have enough time to work it out. Or it may be because the influence from the learner's L1 is too strong, or they may have got into the habit of using the less acceptable feature and find it difficult to change. There is also the factor of the developmental order of acquisition of grammatical structures, which was discussed in **7 Teaching grammar**: it seems likely that there is a certain order of acquisition which cannot be changed, and therefore if we correct a structure for which the learner is not developmentally ready, the correction will not, at that point, result in uptake. Whatever the reason, it is clear that we cannot expect every correction of every error to produce clear and immediate improvement in students' performance; the effect is likely to be marginal, delayed and cumulative. We need to be patient and willing to continue to re-correct the same errors as necessary.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the statements below: where would you place yourself, in each case, on the continuum indicated by the dotted line between the two extremes?

- 1 The fact that the teacher assesses and corrects students' language implies a power hierarchy: the teacher above, the student below.
Very much agree ←-----→ *Totally disagree*
- 2 Receiving corrective feedback from the teacher is potentially humiliating to the student.
Very much agree ←-----→ *Totally disagree*
- 3 Teachers should try not to correct very much, in order not to discourage students.
Very much agree ←-----→ *Totally disagree*
- 4 It is important to draw attention to when students get things right, not just when they get them wrong.
Very much agree ←-----→ *Totally disagree*
- 5 Teachers should not let students correct each other's work, as this is harmful to their relationships.
Very much agree ←-----→ *Totally disagree*

Comment

Most of these have fairly flexible answers, and depend on the respondent's experience, personality, teaching context and professional judgement. My own responses are presented below.

- 1 Power hierarchy. My answer here would tend towards the 'Agree' end of the line, which may surprise you. In order to understand, you need to free yourself from the negative connotations often associated with the phrase *power hierarchy*. Power hierarchies may in some circumstances be necessary, productive and fully compatible with good human relationships: parents and children, for example. In the classroom, the fact that the teacher is an authority on the subject being taught, with the power to assess and correct student errors, undeniably gives them a position of power. It is important to be aware of this in order to be careful not to exploit such a position ... which leads us to the next item.
- 2 Potentially humiliating. Again, I would tend towards 'Agree'. Note the crucial word *potentially*. The issue here is not whether correction humiliates, but whether there is or is not such a potential. As with the previous item, this is a question of awareness: we need to be aware that we have the power to humiliate a student in order to take care not to do so.
- 3 Correction may discourage. I'm about in the middle here. It is true that a lot of corrective feedback with no compensating praise (see next item) may result in discouragement and even antagonism; however, too little may lead to frustration or even irritation on the part of the students. It's a question of balance, and of being aware of students' preferences (see **Section 2**).
- 4 Notice things that are right. Very much agree. Many teachers simply do not think of drawing attention to students getting things right. It is seen as a sort of default situation, not needing to be noticed. But surely getting it right should not be taken for granted: a student who produces an accurate bit of language (particularly if they are avoiding a very common mistake) deserves to be noticed and praised. Moreover, other students are likely to learn from the acceptable language item to which their attention has been drawn.
- 5 Correcting each other. It is true that students don't really like being corrected by one another (see **Section 2**). This is not so much because of embarrassment or distress, but rather because they do not rely on one another to provide the appropriate correction, and prefer to get it from the teacher. In some situations, however, helping each other to get things right can be a positive experience for all (see **11 Teaching writing**).

12.2 Learner preferences: whether and how students like to be corrected

There has been quite a lot of research on the subject of learner preferences in the area of error correction, the majority based on input from adult respondents. In this section, I'll present some of the major findings, and also refer to an unpublished survey of my own, based on questionnaires administered to primary and secondary schoolchildren in Israel.

Clearly, it is useful to learn about learner preferences with regard to error correction, though we are not necessarily obliged to do exactly as they want: other research may indicate that the students may want things that are not necessarily best for their learning; and our own professional judgement also counts for something! But we can certainly gain insights and awareness that can inform classroom decisions. Each finding is followed by my own suggestions as to possible implications for classroom practice.

Pause for thought

As a learner of an additional language yourself, how much do you like to be corrected? In speech? In writing? Do you find it helpful? What kinds of corrections help you most?

Comment

Personally, I really want to be corrected if I get something wrong, whether spelling, pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. I'm fairly advanced in my second language, so corrections don't happen very often: when they do, I'm likely to remember and learn from them. It's probably the corrections in writing that I find most helpful, because it's more important to me to produce correct language in writing than it is in speech. You probably also agree that you want to be corrected; and there is substantial evidence that this is true of most learners, as we shall see below.

Learners want to be corrected

A synthesis of research on teachers' and learners' preferences with regard to oral corrective feedback (Li, 2017) indicates a firm and consistent desire by most learners for teachers to correct their errors. This was confirmed by my own survey: school pupils wanted the teacher to correct them in both oral and written work, though the preference was slightly more pronounced for written. Interestingly, Li also notes that learners on the whole want to be corrected more than teachers want to correct them; and the same appears to be true when the feedback relates to written work (Amrhein and Nassaji, 2010).

Implications for practice. The desire of learners to be corrected fits the generally accepted research-based assumption that error correction helps learning. So in general, yes, you should correct errors. This does not, however, necessarily mean correcting every single mistake all the time: see the next page for further discussion of selective correction.

Learners want teachers to tell them the correct form

Both in my own survey and in the two papers cited on the previous page, the majority of respondents wanted the teacher to tell them explicitly both what was wrong and what the correct form should have been. This is an interesting finding, given the general assumption that learners are likely to learn something better if we get them to work it out for themselves – see, for example, the research on retrieval in vocabulary practice, as discussed in **6 Teaching vocabulary**. Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) conclude rather disapprovingly that many learners like to shift the responsibility for identifying the correct form on to the teacher. I am not so sure: the reason may rather be that students are not confident they can provide the right form themselves, and want to be sure they get it right.

Implications for practice. I have the feeling that, in general, learners are right to require their teachers to tell them what's right, not just what's wrong. That is one of the functions of a teacher: to teach acceptable forms. On the other hand, if a learner is capable of self-correction, then the process of doing so is likely to produce better learning than just being fed with the target form. So where you are sure the student could, with a bit of effort, self-correct, try to get them to do so. Where you think they can't, or where you are not sure, it's probably better to just provide the correct form. It's not always easy, however, to distinguish between the two!

Learners do not, on the whole, want to be corrected by their peers

This is a finding reported in Li (2017), and I got the same result in my study. When the teachers of the students in my survey were discussing later why this is so, most of them thought that the reason was students' unwillingness to embarrass or distress each other by correcting. But when, later, they went back and asked their classes about this, it turned out that the main reason was that the learners felt that teacher feedback was simply more reliable.

Implications for practice. I think this is fair enough: if a student makes a mistake during a lesson, it's probably better to correct them yourself, rather than asking one of the other students to do so. (A problem is that very often, in my experience, if one student answers a question wrongly, someone else in the classroom calls out the correction without being asked! And then it is up to me to confirm (or not).) As regards correction of written work, peer editing – where students work together on both their compositions – can be very useful and save work for the teacher (see **Section 4** on page 171): but it is a supplement to teacher feedback, not a substitute.

Learners want most (sometimes all) of their mistakes to be corrected

One of the consistent differences between teachers' and learners' attitudes to error correction that emerges from the research is that learners, on the whole, say they want to get a lot more correction than the teachers wish to give. Teachers' reluctance to correct everything, particularly in written work, is partly because of the sheer load of work that this would mean, partly because they don't want to discourage learners by covering the page with corrections, and partly because, where there are a lot of corrections, the learner cannot possibly attend to and deal with every one.

Implications for practice. Some (e.g., Lee, 2019) suggest that ‘less is more’ and that it is better to focus on specific aspects of the written language in feedback and ignore errors relating to anything else; but not everyone agrees. In any case, it’s often almost impossible to provide all the corrective feedback that learners often say they want, for the reasons given above: we have to compromise. Quite how much you decide to correct will depend largely on your own teaching context and constraints. In any case, it’s probably worth discussing with students in advance how their oral and written work will be corrected: listening to what they want, clarifying your own approach (and constraints) and coordinating expectations.

Learners want error correction to be given immediately rather than delayed

This clearly relates to correction of speech rather than writing; though even for writing, the implication is that the feedback should be given sooner rather than later. On the whole, the research backs up learners’ preferences here: see, for example, Fu and Li (2022). It appears that a correction that is given immediately in response to an error is more likely to have positive learning outcomes than one that is given later. On the other hand, we often do not want to interrupt a student who is speaking, since such interruption may disturb the flow, and negatively affect the communicative nature of the speech.

Implications for practice. The above issue is discussed in more detail in the next section.

12.3 Oral correction

The main methods of oral correction used in most classes (following a much-quoted study by Lyster and Ranta, 1997) are:

- 1 **Recast.** The teacher simply says the correct version of the student’s erroneous utterance, without any further comment. For example:

Student: I reading a book.
Teacher: I am reading a book.
- 2 **Elicitation.** The teacher elicits the correct form from the student. For example:

Student: I reading a book.
Teacher: Can you correct that?
Student: I am reading a book.
- 3 **Clarification request.** The teacher asks for a clarification of the meaning. For example:

Student: I reading a book.
Teacher: I didn’t understand, can you say that more clearly?
Student: I am reading a book.
- 4 **Metalinguistic feedback.** The teacher explains using grammatical or other linguistic terminology. For example:

Student: I reading a book.
Teacher: In the present continuous, you need the verb *be* before the *-ing* form of the verb.

- 5 **Explicit correction.** The teacher says explicitly that there has been a mistake, and what the right form is. For example:

Student: I reading a book.

Teacher: No, that is incorrect. You should have said 'I am reading.'

- 6 **Repetition.** The teacher repeats the incorrect utterance, with a rising intonation and a doubting expression, implying that there's something wrong with it. For example:

Student: I reading a book.

Teacher: I *reading* a book?

Effectiveness of the different techniques

According to the Lyster and Ranta study, and confirmed by later research, the recast is by far the most common of all the techniques listed above. Teachers use it because it is quick and easy and causes minimum disruption of a student's speech. However, it is also the least effective in bringing about uptake (i.e. in getting the student to understand and produce the correct form in response to the correction), and probably the least likely to result in lasting learning. This may be partly because the student sometimes does not realize it is a correction at all; they may not notice that the teacher's utterance was different from their own and understand it merely as an echo or confirmation. But it is partly also because the recast does not require any kind of confirmation or processing by the learner, and therefore gets less attention.

It seems that the most effective oral correction involves some kind of negotiation and active contribution by the student, to ensure that they have paid attention to it. So elicitation and repetitions, for example, which get the student to rethink what they have said and (hopefully!) self-correct, have significantly better results than do recasts.

Should we correct during fluent speech?

The above conclusion produces a dilemma. On the one hand, we do not want to interrupt students as they are speaking, which might disrupt the flow of speech, discourage and harm communication. On the other hand, no correction at all might lead to the mistakes being further entrenched, and contradicts the general desire of most students to be corrected in real time (see the previous section). So if a teacher decides to correct, they may choose to do so using a quick recast, hoping to disrupt the speech as little as possible. But then, as noted above, the correction might be ineffective. If you are going to correct effectively, you need to stop the student, and correct in a way that ensures that they have noticed and accepted the correction – which will inevitably involve some disruption of communication. There is always the possibility of noting the mistake and coming back to it later, but as we have seen in the previous section, this appears to be less effective, and students prefer to be corrected immediately. There is also research evidence that immediate correction does not discourage but actually contributes to WTC (willingness to communicate) (Zare et al., 2022). See the **Comment** below for my own conclusions.

Pause for thought

How would you address the issue described on the previous page? How do you feel about interrupting a student who is speaking in order to correct errors?

Comment

There is no one easy answer to this. In any specific instance, we will need to make a decision based on our own professional judgement, taking into account a number of factors: the level and confidence of the student, the goals of the course, the frequency or gravity of the error, the willingness of the student to tolerate interruption and so on. The main point to be remembered here is that even if in general you prefer not to interrupt communicative interaction, there may be times where such interruption for the purposes of error correction may be helpful, learner-friendly, and productive of learning. In any case, consulting the students in advance about how they wish to be corrected during speech may help you make the right decisions.

12.4 Written correction

This section relates to the correction of language errors in short writing assignments, such as language exercises, answers to comprehension questions, or brief compositions. (For guidance on giving feedback on longer written assignments, including corrections, aimed at the rewriting and improvement of the composition as a whole, see **11 Teaching writing**.)

Below are some samples of uncorrected student work, followed by some Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which relate to the correction of such assignments with suggested answers.

The first sample is a grammar exercise on the present perfect, which the students did for homework. The second is a test on vocabulary, which is also intended to check students' mastery of the use of relative clauses in definitions. The third is a short piece of writing done in class as an individual summary of a group discussion, and given in to the teacher at the end of the lesson.

Pause for thought

How would you correct the student writing shown on the next page? Which errors would you correct, and how? Which might you ignore, and why?

1. Grammar exercises on the present perfect, given as homework

8.1 You are asking people questions about things they have done. Make questions with ever using the words in brackets.

1. (ride / horse?) Have you ever ridden a horse?
2. (be / California?) Have you been in California?
3. (run / marathon?) Have you ever ran the marathon?
4. (speak / famous person?) Have you ever spoken with famous person?
5. (most beautiful place / visit?) What's the most beautiful place ever visited?

14.2 Complete the answers to these questions. Use the verb in brackets.

Example: Is it a beautiful painting? (see) Yes, it's the most beautiful painting I've ever seen.

1. Is it a good film? (see) Yes, it's the best film I've ever seen
2. Is it a long book? (read) Yes, it's the longer book I've ever read
3. Is she an interesting person? (meet) Yes, she's the most interested girl I have ever met.

2. Test on vocabulary and relative clauses

Define the following words, using who/which/that/whose/when/where.

For example: a deserted house = a house where nobody lives

1. a temple: a house where religious people lives in.
2. a motionless tree: a tree which not moving at all.
3. an illusion: a false sight.
4. courage: a man who not have any fear.
5. sweat: it's like terrible but more then this.
6. a PR man: a man who work on a public relations.
7. a virus: a thing which make people sick.
8. an antibody: a thing which help the man get over the sickness.
9. a host: a man who takes visitors to his house
10. a paw: a pake of a animal.

3. Writing following a discussion

Dear Helpful Harriet,

I have a problem with this teacher at school. He is always shouting at me, though I don't disturb more than lots of other pupils in the class. It's true that I sometimes don't do my homework, but I know his subject very well, always get high marks on the tests, so there is no point doing silly homework. He gave me a much lower mark than I deserve at the end of the term. It's not fair.

And it's no good saying go to the class teacher, she always backs him up. What can I do?

Yours,
FRUSTRATED STUDENT

My advice to you is to talk with the problematic teacher and trying to explain him what do you fill and think about her and what do you think that you can do together to solve your problem together, please let me know what happened with your case

Comment

How, and how much, you correct will depend on various factors: how important accuracy is for your students in this course; what the conventions are for error-correction in your institution; how proficient a particular student is. After inserting your own corrections, read on to the section headed **Frequently asked questions** below.

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

- 1 Should I use a red pen (or red insertions, if the responses are in digital form) for my comments? Or another colour?

It's probably best to use a bright colour for corrections, simply in order to make them clearly visible to the student. Some teachers feel that red is too aggressive and prefer to use another colour. If the assignment was submitted digitally, you have the option of using track changes, or notes using Google Docs, and you can choose which colour to use.

- 2 Is it necessary to give an evaluative comment at the end such as 'Well done'?

Students really like to know what your overall assessment was of the assignment: so let them know what it was in an evaluative comment or assessment. Even more helpful are specific comments aimed at helping the student in future similar assignments: 'Remember next time to start sentences with capital letters!'

- 3 Should I correct all the mistakes? If not, how do I decide what to correct and what not?

As we have seen in **Section 2**, students on the whole want to be corrected more than teachers want to provide corrections! A general guideline might be that if there are not many mistakes, correct them all, but if there are a lot, allow yourself to ignore some of them. You certainly need to correct mistakes that are associated with the goal of the exercise (for example, in an exercise on the simple past you will correct mistaken past forms). Of the others, you need to decide for yourself which are the most important ones to correct and which can be ignored for the moment.

- 4 Should I write in the correct forms? Give a hint what these should be using codes, ('sp', for example, for 'spelling')? Or simply underline something to indicate it was wrong, without any hint?

Students on the whole like you to tell them exactly what the mistake was and to write in the correct version (see **Section 2**, page 168). On the other hand, we simply don't have the time to write in all the correct forms in all our students' compositions if we have a lot of assignments to correct and a heavy work schedule. Probably the answer is a compromise: write in the corrections if you think the student would find it difficult to work them out on their own, and otherwise just underline, cross out or put in an insertion mark ^. Whether you use a code such as 'sp' for 'spelling' is a matter of personal preference; there is some evidence that students prefer simple underlining (Chandler, 2003).

- 5 Should I only correct, or also note things that were good, e.g., particularly effective use of language by a student?

It is important to remind yourself to note positive things, where appropriate: ticks, double ticks, complimentary comments in the margin. These responses can draw students' attention to their successes, boosting morale and reinforcing learning.

- 6 How far can I rely on AWE (Automated Writing Evaluation) tools to correct students' written work?

AWE tools such as Grammarly can be very helpful and time-saving when the written assignment is submitted digitally, in that they pick up the more obvious mistakes and/or inappropriate expressions and suggest corrections. They are becoming more and more accurate and comprehensive. However, they still cannot completely replace the teacher: there are aspects of coherence, appropriate vocabulary and relevance which only a human teacher can assess and give feedback on; and it still occasionally happens that AWE tools will neglect to correct a mistake, or correct unnecessarily.

- 7 When or why should I require the student to redo some or all of the assignment?

If the work is in digital text, then students can very easily implement your corrections and rewrite. On paper, however, rewriting of the items of a grammar exercise can be mechanical and rather tedious and does not benefit students so much. You might, instead, give the class the same, or similar, exercises a few days later to see if there has been progress in eliminating errors. Full written compositions, in contrast, should usually be redrafted, whether on paper or digital, correcting mistakes of language, style, content and organization. For more discussion of this topic, see **11 Teaching writing**.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 Can you define the primary function of error correction in the classroom? A secondary one?
- 2 What are some problems with error correction as a means of helping students improve accuracy?
- 3 Do most students want to have their mistakes corrected?
- 4 Why, probably, do students prefer on the whole to be corrected by the teacher rather than by peers?
- 5 Which is the most common oral correction procedure? Why is it probably not very effective?
- 6 What can a teacher do to make sure that an oral correction is noticed and learnt from?
- 7 List some of the considerations you might take into account when deciding which mistakes, and how many of them, to correct in a piece of written work.

Further reading

- Edge, J. (1990). *Mistakes and Correction*. London: Longman.
(A simple, practical handbook: suggests various techniques for correcting in different situations)
- Ferris, D. R. (2011). *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing* (2nd Edition). The University of Michigan Press.
(A research-based but practically-oriented discussion of written error correction)
- Nassaji, H. and Kartchava, E. (Eds.) (2021). *The Cambridge Handbook of Corrective Feedback in Second Language Learning and Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
(A collection of papers summarizing research on different aspects of corrective feedback)

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