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The role of feedback and examples of techniques leading to its successful use

Abstract

This paper displays the definition of feedback, its role in the learning process and presents different modes of how feedback may be organised in classroom conditions. The first issue presented in the article is related to types of mistakes and their sources. The following points are devoted to the matter who makes corrections. To be more precise, three of them are discussed: teacher – student correction, student – student correction and self-correction and supported with appropriate techniques which lead to a successful accomplishment of feedback.

Keywords: *feedback, slips, errors, interlanguage, praise, tests, techniques, ALTE, ROA*

Abstrakt

Poniższy artykuł ma za zadanie wyjaśnić co to jest informacja zwrotna, ukazać rolę jaką pełni w procesie nauczania oraz przedstawić różne sposoby jej wdrożenia w pracy z uczniami. Pierwszym aspektem poruszonym w tym artykule jest opis rodzajów błędów oraz wskazanie ich pochodzenia. Kolejne punkty dotyczą kwestii kto inicjuje i kto dokonuje poprawy błędów. Wymienione zostały trzy możliwości: nauczyciel – uczeń, uczeń – uczeń oraz autokorekta, które zostały dokładnie opisane oraz podparte odpowiednimi technikami będącymi kluczem do sukcesu w obrębie omawianego tematu.

Słowa kluczowe: *informacja zwrotna, przejęzyczenia, błędy, interferencja językowa, pochwała, testy, techniki, ALTE, ROA*

Introduction

Feedback is considered a constructive reaction to or significant information about students' language abilities. It aims to increase their self-awareness concerning the learning process and achievements. Moreover, it helps them to evaluate success and progress in second language acquisition and implement improvements when necessary. If feedback is organised appropriately, it provides students with a guide by giving them instructions and directions of how to reach definite goals. Accordingly, it makes them more absorbed and occupied with the classroom activities.

Naturally, teachers should consider a number of variables to make feedback effective and relevant. In the first place, only the main mistakes and misconceptions should be assessed. The reason for providing students with such feedback is not to overwhelm them with too many corrections and thus not to make them feel that it is not worth making further effort. In other words, "learners should not be made to feel guilty or inadequate because they have made an error. If they have to correct every error they make, they feel they are being punished rather than helped and they often become negative about the language they are learning and resentful of the teacher. They lose confidence and motivation and try to avoid using the language that is causing them so much pain" (Bolitho and Tomlinson, 1995, p. 113).

If teachers comment on students' weaknesses, they are obliged to equip them with additional material and should indicate what matters they have to focus on. Additionally, the important issue to be outlined is whether accuracy or fluency is assessed. As for the former one, only immediate feedback is effective and meaningful as the student is still engaged in a particular subject matter. If fluency is to be assessed, "immediate correction that diverts from the flow of speaking is less appropriate" (Scrivener, 2005, p. 299).

Furthermore, information about mistakes should be clear and comprehensible for the student to know what needs to be improved. It should be conveyed in a sensitive, encouraging and positive manner. Students then feel support and respect from the teacher and obtain motivation for further linguistic development.

On the other hand, when teachers concentrate on positive aspects of oral and written work, they can point to:

- 1) Successful communication – where students have expressed themselves clearly (and been understood by others);
- 2) Accurate use of grammar points recently learned;
- 3) Use of new vocabulary, appropriate expressions;

- 4) Good pronunciation – expressive intonation;
- 5) Language in the appropriate style – good use of colloquial expressions in conversation;
- 6) Good use of fluency strategies in conversation;
- 7) Handwriting, spelling and punctuation in written work (Gower, Philips and Walters, 2005, p. 163).

What is more, feedback ought to be individualized due to the fact that teachers work with different learners. These variations include aptitude, intelligence, styles and strategies of learning, individual preferences of working, motivation, self-confidence or competence among students. Other factors that should be taken into account when providing feedback are cultural aspects, the stage of the lesson and the course, types of tasks and topics introduced by the teacher or the roles he adopts in order to facilitate learning. Alternatively, teachers can give feedback to the entire group. But it is justified and appropriate only when most of the class fails to understand a concept and needs additional reinforcement.

Feedback can be delivered in several modes. It can be done orally, in written form, through demonstration and by visual instruments. For instance, these can be praises, correction techniques, regular tests and tutorials which include discussions and revision of the work done, comments, grades and marks or reports. Such a variety of approaches to correction determines the issue of who acts as the assessor, whether it is a teacher or a student. And this is the subject of a further elaboration in this article.

Types and sources for mistakes

Before discussion on who makes corrections and the demonstration of a number of forms of correction, it seems justified to refer first to types and sources for mistakes that the concept of feedback, deemed to be the integral part of a second language acquisition, results from. Julian Edge (in Harmer, 2007, p. 137) introduces three broad categories of mistakes. The first is called *slips* and is referred to when students are able to correct mistakes themselves providing that these are indicated to them. The second category are *errors*. These are mistakes that students are incapable to correct themselves and thus certain issues need to be re-explained. *Attempts* comprise the third category. Here students try to produce utterances, yet have no certainty how to say them correctly. Regarding the sources for mistakes, Jeremy Harmer (2007, p. 137-138) displays two of them. The first is called *L1 'interference'* where errors are provoked at the level of sounds, grammar and word usage.

The second source pertains to *developmental errors* and the process of over-generalisation. It means that students start to overuse a newly introduced rule so that they make mistakes even with language items they have learnt before. Nevertheless, "when second-language learners make this kind of error, therefore, they are demonstrating part of the natural process of language learning. Developmental errors are part of the students' interlanguage, that is the version of the language which a learner has at any stage of development, and which is continually re-shaped as he or she aims towards full mastery" (Harmer, 2007, p. 138).

Apart from the three already mentioned categories, Hanna Komorowska (1999, p. 232)¹ adds two more. She refers to language subsystems like pronunciation, writing, lexis and grammar issues which may be problematic and therefore, are the cause of mistakes. The other category is associated with comprehensibility. Komorowska introduces the so called *local mistakes* and *global mistakes*. The former ones do not change the general meaning of uttered messages and are easily understood by interlocutors whereas the latter ones make messages inexplicable and unintelligible. As for the sources, she also refers to language interference and over-generalisation but puts forward three additional mechanisms that give rise to mistakes. She points to the way the students acquire a second language, that is to their individual styles and strategies. Next, she draws attention to how they are taught, whether the teacher acts as a provider, a giver of comprehensible input, the roles he adopts in the classroom and styles of teaching he introduces. Lastly, she mentions certain modifications of communicative strategies made by the students. If they are not confident users of a second language, they often tend to simplify utterances or use only one tense not necessarily appropriate to a given context.

H. D. Brown suggests possible solutions to "avoid the first language 'crutch' syndrome" (2001, p. 66). Primarily, the teacher should get his students acquainted with causes of mistakes. He should also make them aware that their native language system does not always have to be detrimental to a process of second language acquisition. Moreover, the teacher should gently persuade his students to think directly in the target language during language production as it facilitates lessening of the native language interference. Above all, Brown underlines that the students should be given the clear message "that mistakes are not 'bad' but that most mistakes are good indicators that innate language acquisition abilities are alive and well.

¹All excerpts selected from Komorowska (1999). *Metodyka Nauczania Języków Obcych*. Warszawa: WSiP are translated by the author of the article.

Mistakes are often indicators of aspects of the new language that are still developing" (2001, p. 68).

Teacher – student correction

GIVING PRAISE

The first form of accomplishing assessment is giving praise or blame. George Petty (in Harmer, 2007, p. 138) introduces two parts of response to students' progress. These are *medals* (praise) and *missions* (blame). The first item refers to activities performed in an appropriate manner and the second is the instruction which contributes to improvement. Naturally, students long for praise, however, caution, sensibility and common sense for over-compliments are required as they may be counter-productive.

Similarly, Jere E. Brophy indicates that "praise must not be overused if it is to be used effectively, and that some investment of time and attention to the specifics of performance or conduct of the student is required." (1980, p. 40). In his publication devoted to teacher praise, Brophy (1980, p. 41) provides guidelines for effective praise.

Table 1: Guidelines for effective praise

EFFECTIVE PRAISE	INEFFECTIVE PRAISE
1. Is delivered contingently.	1. Is delivered randomly or unsystematically.
2. Specifies the particulars of the accomplishment.	2. Is restricted to global positive reactions.
3. Shows spontaneity, variety, and other signs of credibility; suggests clear attention to the student's accomplishment.	3. Shows a bland uniformity that suggests a conditioned response made with minimal attention.
4. Rewards attainment of specified performance criteria (which can include effort criteria, however).	4. Rewards mere participation, without consideration of performance processes or outcomes.
5. Provides information to students about their competence or the value of their accomplishments.	5. Provides no information at all or gives students information about their status.

<p>6. Orients students toward better appreciation of their own task-related behaviour and thinking about problem solving.</p> <p>7. Uses students' own prior accomplishments as the context for describing present accomplishments.</p> <p>8. Is given in recognition of noteworthy effort or success at difficult (for this student) tasks.</p> <p>9. Attributes success to effort and ability, implying that similar success can be expected in the future.</p> <p>10. Fosters endogenous attributions (students believe that they expend effort on the task because they enjoy the task and/or want to develop task-relevant skills).</p> <p>11. Focuses students' attention on their own task-relevant behaviour.</p> <p>12. Fosters appreciation of, and desirable attributions about, task-relevant behaviour after the process is completed.</p>	<p>6. Orients students toward comparing themselves with others and thinking about competing.</p> <p>7. Uses the accomplishments of peers as the context for describing students' present accomplishments.</p> <p>8. Is given without regard to the effort expended or the meaning of the accomplishment (for this student).</p> <p>9. Attributes success to ability alone or to external factors such as luck or (easy) task difficulty.</p> <p>10. Fosters exogenous attributions (students believe that they expend effort on the task for the external reasons – to please the teacher, win a competition or reward, etc.).</p> <p>11. Focuses students' attention on the teacher as an external authority figure who is manipulating them.</p> <p>12. Intrudes into the ongoing process, distracting attention from task-relevant behaviour.</p>
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TESTING STUDENTS

Another way of assessing students is organising tests. Yet, to make the test meaningful and purposeful, it should be measured in terms of *validity* and *reliability*. The test is valid when it actually examines what it is supposed to examine. There are five types of validity distinguished:

- 1) Construct validity: the extent to which the content of the test/assessment reflects current theoretical understandings of the skill(s) being assessed;
- 2) Content validity: whether it represents an adequate sample of ability;
- 3) Criterion-related validity: the extent to which the results correlate with other independent measures of ability (Brindley, 2001, p. 138);
- 4) Face validity: it concerns test designers and the look of the test. In other words, if the look of the test reflects the content measured, then it is valid;

- 5) Convergent validity: whether a particular construct, such as listening comprehension, can be tested in a variety of different ways (Cohen, 2001, p. 526).

As for reliability, it refers to consistency of test results which can be estimated by giving the same group of students the same test at two different points in time. If the students attain similar results, then such tests can be acknowledged to be reliable (Brindley, 2001, p. 138).

To measure students' progress Harmer (2007, p. 379-380) displays four categories of tests:

- 1) Placement tests: this type of a test is designed in order to decide on the appropriate level for students and to place them in the right class. This classification is based on students' grammar and vocabulary knowledge and assessment of productive and receptive skills.
- 2) Diagnostic tests: these tests are used to reveal students' deficiencies in knowledge and skills.
- 3) Progress or achievement tests: these tests measure students' development in terms of knowledge and skills with reference to syllabus approved by school. Progress tests are designed by teachers and given, for instance, at the end of a unit or every few weeks. Achievement tests contain types of tasks or texts that students are familiar with. Obviously, it does not mean the same but similar. This type of tests is given at the end of a term.
- 4) Proficiency tests: these tests are designed in order to give an overall picture of students' knowledge and linguistic abilities. They are aimed at people who want to be admitted to a university, get a job or acquire a certificate.

According to Brown (2001, p. 409), students should be equipped with test-taking strategies which would train them to become successful test takers. He presents three options:

Table 2: Before-, during-, and after-test options

Before the Test

1. Give students all the information you can about the test. Exactly what will the test cover? Which topics will be the most important? What kind of items will be included? How long will it be?
2. Encourage students to do a systematic review of material. For example: skim the textbook and other material, outline major points, write down examples, etc.

3. Give them practice tests or exercises, if available.
4. Facilitate formation of a study group, if possible.
5. Caution students to get a good night's rest before the test.
6. Remind students to get to the classroom early.

During the test

1. As soon as the test is distributed, tell students to quickly look over the whole test in order to get a good grasp of its different parts.
2. Remind them to mentally figure out how much time they will need for each part.
3. Advise them to concentrate as carefully as possible.
4. Alert students a few minutes before the end of the class period so that they can proofread their answers, catch careless errors, and still finish on time.

After the Test

1. When you return the test, include feedback on specific things the student did well, what he or she did not do well, and if possible, the reasons for such a judgment on your part.
2. Advise the student to pay careful attention in class to whatever you say about the test results.
3. Encourage questions from students.
4. Advise students to make a plan to pay special attention in the future to points that they are weak on.

Apart from giving praise and organising tests, teachers also use another tools to point out students' mistakes. Depending on what is corrected, whether accuracy or fluency, they use variety of techniques. Harmer (2007, p. 144-146) and Scrivener (2005, p. 202-203, 301) suggest implementation of the following:

- 1) Repeating;
- 2) Echoing;
- 3) Statement and question;
- 4) Facial expression or a gesture;
- 5) Hinting;
- 6) Reformulation;
- 7) Gentle correction;
- 8) Recording mistakes (e.g. grammar, words and phrases, pronunciation, appropriacy);
- 9) Drawing a timeline on the board;
- 10) Writing the problem sentences on board for discussion;
- 11) Give a dictation based on sentences from students' written work;
- 12) Use correction codes in the margin.

As for the last point, it is advised that the students become acquainted with the meaning of correction codes so that they can benefit from them. Codes indicate types of mistakes and thus stimulate students to make corrections themselves. The table presented below may serve the model of correction symbols.

Table 3: Error Correction Codes

Error Correction: Editing Symbols		
Symbol	Meaning	Incorrect Sentence
sv	subject-verb agreement	The student <u>work</u> hard. There <u>is</u> five employees.
S	no subject	<u>Find</u> it easier to study in Arabic.
pl	singular/plural	The Internet has a lot of <u>informations</u> . You can make <u>new friend</u> easily.
sp	spelling	The <u>meneger</u> is a woman.
A	Article (a,an,the)	Diners expect <u>glass</u> of water when they first sit down at their table.
p	punctuation	I live in Fujairah <u>but</u> I go to school in Al Ain.
delete	unnecessary word	My teacher <u>she</u> watches everyone all the time.
^	add word/s	A camel is an animal <u>lives</u> in the desert.
cap	capitalization	Some people love to <u>drive</u> landcruisers.
vf	verb form	I am <u>live</u> in the hostel.
T	verb tense	I <u>see</u> my friend yesterday.
wf	word form	This book is <u>bored</u> .
ww	wrong word	My teacher <u>learns</u> me many new things.
wo	wrong word order	We never <u>class have</u> on Fridays.
Pron	pronoun reference	My brother loves to swim. <u>She</u> goes swimming everyday.
RO	run-on sentence	Lily failed the exam and she is upset and she went home and her mother said she shouldn't worry.
CS	comma splice	Mary was tired, <u>she</u> went to sleep.
SF	fragment (incomplete sentence)	She was tired. <u>Because</u> she always went to bed at 3:00am.
ns/	start a new sentence here	Sleep is important, <u>in</u> addition, eating healthy food is necessary.
prep	preposition	The cafeteria starts serving dinner <u>in</u> 6:00 PM.
conj	Conjunction missing or incorrect	I like coffee <u>and</u> I don't like tea.
?		<i>I don't understand what you want to say.</i>

Sweet Level 1 Writing. *Error Correction Symbols*, 2017. Retrieved from <https://sweetsiobhan.wordpress.com/2017/08/18/error-correction-symbols>, 20.02.2018.

Lastly, it is worth making a mention of ways which have not been enumerated yet. Naturally, these are comments in the form of short interjections

(e.g. Good, All right, Okay, Very good), marks, grades and reports (written usually at the end of a term or year).

According to Komorowska (1999, p. 233), teacher – student correction has both advantages and drawbacks. She refers to its appropriacy in terms of content and immediacy. Besides, it is audible, quick and hence not time consuming. On the other hand, the teacher is not able to determine what category of mistake he deals with, whether it is a slip or an error. Moreover, this type of correction does not stimulate students to be creative and involved in finding a solution to the problem and above all, students are thoroughly teacher dependent.

Student – student correction

When correction is organised among pupils, it engages the whole group in the process. Students are obliged to listen to responses of others, indicate mistakes and then set them right. They become partners cooperating and negotiating together in order to attain common goals and objectives. Hence, it improves not only linguistic competence but also interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, students become more independent on the teacher in terms of what should be corrected and by what means. Naturally, it does not mean that there is no need for the teacher's presence whatsoever. He is no longer a controller; however, he may take up the roles of participant, resource, tutor and above all, an observer.

There is a number of possibilities of conducting student – student correction. Scrivener suggests that it may be carried in chain. "If student A makes an error, elicit a correction from student B. If she also fails to get it right, then get another student to help her. This is where the chain comes in: C corrects B, and only when B has got the idea does B then correct A's error. A then gives the correct answer back to you" (2005, p. 301). Students may also be asked to write comments to a piece of written work, proofread, revise written work with a partner, check listening or reading comprehension with a partner, give marks and grades with reference to criteria agreed upon, offer rating of an oral presentation, detect pronunciation or grammar errors (Brown, 2001, p. 415-416).

Self – correction

Correction of this type seems to be the most profitable for students. It increases self-ego and heightens self-esteem. Students develop second language competence, they become more conscious second language users and therefo-

re, are ready to take risks. However, its accomplishment is possible only when students are capable of performing it themselves. In other words, rules prescribing a linguistic practice must be deeply ingrained in students' minds so that they can refer to these on every occasion. Such mistakes signal only the need of additional portion of activities and exercises held by the teacher relating to what was previously introduced and not re-explaining the material afresh.

The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) introduces statements measuring abilities in different skill areas, called 'can do' statements, so that students can seek information from to assess their linguistic competence.

Table 4: ALTE levels

LEVELS	Listening/Speaking	Reading	Writing
C2 Level 5	CAN advise on or talk about complex or sensitive issues, understanding colloquial references and dealing confidently with hostile questions.	CAN understand documents, correspondence and reports, including the finer points of complex texts.	CAN write letters on any subject and full notes of meetings or seminars with good expression and accuracy.
C1 Level 4	CAN contribute effectively to meetings and seminars within own area of work or keep up a casual conversation with a good degree of fluency, coping with abstract expressions.	CAN read quickly enough to cope with an academic course, to read the media for information or to understand non-standard correspondence.	CAN prepare/draft professional correspondence, take reasonably accurate notes in meetings or write an essay which shows an ability to communicate.
B2 Level 3	CAN follow or give a talk on a familiar topic or keep up a conversation on a fairly wide range of topics.	CAN scan texts for relevant information, and understand detailed instructions or advice.	CAN make notes while someone is talking or write a letter including non-standard requests.
B1 Level 2	CAN express opinions on abstract/cultural matters in a limited way or offer advice within a known area, and understand instructions or public announcements.	CAN understand routine information and articles, and the general meaning of non-routine information within a familiar area.	CAN write letters or make notes on familiar or predictable matters.

A2 Level 1	CAN express simple opinions or requirements in a familiar context.	CAN understand straightforward information within a known area, such as on products and signs and simple textbooks or reports on familiar matters.	CAN complete forms and write short simple letters or postcards related to personal information.
A1 ALTE break-through level	CAN understand basic instructions or take part in a basic factual conversation on a predictable topic.	CAN understand basic notices, instructions or information.	CAN complete basic forms, and write notes including times, dates and places.

English Club. *ALTE Levels and "Can Do" Statements*, 1997-2018. Retrieved from <https://www.englishclub.com/esl-exams/levels-alte.htm>, 20.02.2018.

ROA (a record of achievement) is another example of self-evaluation. Students enumerate strengths and weaknesses and suggest further proceedings. Teachers add their own comments on students' achievements in correlation with points they have received. The only difference between ROA forms designed for students and teachers is that the latter ones give grades. A typical ROA form is presented below (Harmer, 2007, p.142):

Student name: _____ Subject: _____
Student comment
Signed: _____ Date: _____
Teacher comment
Signed: _____ Date: _____
Grade(s)

Self-correction, apart from the examples mentioned above, may be carried out in the form of vocabulary quizzes, self-assessment modules at the end of a coursebook units, self-checklists, self-check reading/listening comprehension questions or spotting pronunciation or grammar errors from recorded oral production (Brown, 2001, p. 415-416).

Conclusion

On the basis of the above elaborations, it may be clearly stated that feedback is a crucial, integral part of second language acquisition. It should be organised systematically so that the students are aware of the stage they are in the process of learning. All those pieces of information contribute to further actions that need to be undertaken by students in order to improve the whole process. Due to teachers' directions and suggestions, students' progress is clarified, verified, they become intrinsically motivated, self-aware of their achievements, confident, disciplined, enthusiastic and eager to enter upon onward actions and ready to accept forthcoming challenges. Indeed, the process of learning becomes meaningful and leads toward long-term retention. Techniques displayed in this article serve as supporting aids in attaining the above assumptions. Finally, students' engagement with feedback enhances the learning process and improves assessment performance.

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