



## Feedback during oral work

by Jeremy Harmer

from *The Practice of English Language* (Pearson Education 2001).

### C Feedback during oral work

Though feedback - both assessment and correction - can be very helpful during oral work teachers should not deal with all oral production in the same way. Decisions about how to react to performance will depend upon the stage of the lesson, the activity, the type of mistake made, and the particular student who is making that mistake.

#### C1 Accuracy and fluency

A distinction is often made between accuracy and fluency. We need to decide whether a particular activity in the classroom is designed to expect the students' complete accuracy - as in the study of a piece of grammar, a pronunciation exercise, or some vocabulary work for example - or whether we are asking the students to use the language as fluently as possible. We need to make a clear difference between 'non-communicative' and 'communicative' activities (see Chapter 6, a4); whereas the former are generally intended to ensure correctness, the latter are designed to improve language fluency.

Most students want and expect us to give them feedback on their performance. For example, in one celebrated correspondence a non-native speaker teacher was upset when, on a teacher training course in Great Britain, her English trainers refused to correct any of her English because they thought it was inappropriate in a training situation. 'We find that there is practically no correcting at all,' the teacher wrote, 'and this comes to us as a big disappointment' (Lavezzo and Dunford 1993: 62). Her trainers were not guilty of neglect, however. There was a principle at stake: 'The immediate and constant correction of all errors is not necessarily an effective way of helping course participants improve their English', the trainer replied on the same page of the journal.

This exchange of views exemplifies current attitudes to correction and some of the uncertainties around it. The received view has been that when students are involved in accuracy work it is part of the teacher's function to point out and correct the mistakes the students are making. In Chapter 6, a4 we called this 'teacher intervention' - a stage where the teacher stops the activity to make the correction.

During communicative activities, however, it is generally felt that teachers should not interrupt students in mid-flow to point out a grammatical, lexical, or pronunciation error, since to do so interrupts the communication and drags an activity back to the study of language form or precise meaning. Indeed, according to one view of teaching and learning, speaking activities in the classroom, especially activities at the extreme communicative end of our continuum (see Chapter 6, a4), act as a switch to help learners transfer 'learnt' language to the 'acquired' store

(Ellis 1982) or a trigger, forcing students to think carefully about how best to express the meanings they wish to convey (Swain 1985: 249). Part of the value of such activities lies in the various attempts that students have to make to get their meanings across; processing language for communication is, in this view, the best way of processing language for acquisition. Teacher intervention in such circumstances can raise stress levels and stop the acquisition process in its tracks.

If that is the case, the methodologist Tony Lynch argues, then students have a lot to gain from coming up against communication problems. Provided that they have some of the words and phrases necessary to help them negotiate a way out of their communicative impasses, they will learn a lot from so doing. When teachers intervene, not only to correct but also to supply alternative modes of expression to help students, they remove that need to negotiate meaning, and thus they may deny students a learning opportunity. In such situations teacher intervention may sometimes be necessary, but it is nevertheless unfortunate - even when we are using 'gentle correction' (see c3 below). In Tony Lynch's words, 'the best answer to the question of when to intervene in learner talk is: as late as possible' (Lynch 1997: 324).

Nothing in language teaching is quite that simple, of course. There are times during communicative activities when teachers may want to offer correction or suggest alternatives because the students' communication is at risk, or because this might be just the right moment to draw the students' attention to a problem. Furthermore, intensive correction can be just as unpleasant during accuracy work too. It often depends on how it is done, and, just as importantly, who it is done to. Correction is a highly personal business and draws, more than many other classroom interactions, on the rapport between teacher and students. As one student once told me, a good teacher 'should be able to correct people without offending them' (Harmer 1998: 2). This means, for example, not reacting to absolutely every mistake that a student makes if this will de-motivate that student. It means judging just the right moment to correct. In communicative or fluency activities it means deciding if and when to intervene at all.

## **C2 Feedback during accuracy work**

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, correction is usually made up of two distinct stages. In the first, teachers show students that a mistake has been made, and in the second, if necessary, they help the students to do something about it. The first set of techniques we need to be aware of, then, is devoted to showing incorrectness. These techniques are only really beneficial for what we are assuming to be language slips rather than embedded errors. The students are being expected to be able to correct themselves once the problem has been pointed out. If they cannot do this, however, we need to move on to alternative techniques.

**Showing incorrectness:** this can be done in a number of different ways.

- 1 Repeating: here we can ask the student to repeat what they have said, perhaps by saying 'Again?' which, coupled with intonation and expression, will indicate that something is not clear.
- 2 Echoing: this can be a precise way of pin-pointing an error. We repeat what the student has said emphasising the part of the utterance that was wrong, e.g. '\*Flight 309 GO to Paris?' (said with a questioning intonation). It is an extremely efficient way of showing incorrectness during accuracy work.
- 3 Statement and question: we can, of course, simply say 'That's not quite right, or Do people think that's correct?' to indicate that something has not quite worked.
- 4 Expression: when we know our classes well, a simple facial expression or a gesture (for example a wobbling hand), may be enough to indicate that something does not quite work. This needs to be done with care as the wrong expression or gesture can, in some circumstances, appear to be mocking or cruel.
- 5 Hinting: a quick way of helping students to activate rules they already know (but which they have temporarily 'disobeyed') is to give a quiet hint. We might just say the word 'tense' to make them think that perhaps they should have used the past simple rather than the present perfect. We could say 'countable' to make them think about a concord mistake they have made. This kind of hinting depends upon the students and the teacher sharing metalanguage (linguistic terms) which, when whispered to students, will help them to correct themselves.

6 Reformulation: an underrated correction technique is for the teacher to repeat what the student has said correctly, reformulating the sentence, but without making a big issue of it, for example:

Student: I would not have arrived late if I heard the alarm clock.

Teacher: If I had heard...

Student: ... if I had heard the alarm clock.

In all the procedures above, teachers hope that students will be able to correct themselves once the teacher has indicated that something was wrong. However, where students do not know or understand what the problem is because we are dealing with an error or an attempt that is beyond the students' knowledge or capability, the teacher will want to help the students to get it right.

Getting it right: if the student is unable to correct herself, or respond to reformulation, we need to focus on the correct version in more detail. We can say the correct version emphasising the part where there is a problem (e.g. Flight 309 GOES to Paris) before saying the sentence normally (e.g. Flight 309 goes to Paris), or we can say the incorrect part correctly (e.g. Not 'go'. Listen, 'goes'). If necessary we can explain the grammar (e.g. We say 'I go', 'you go', 'we go', but for 'he', 'she' or 'it' we say 'goes', for example 'He goes to Paris', or 'Flight 309 goes to Paris'), or a lexical issue (e.g. We use 'juvenile crime' when we talk about crime committed by children; a 'childish crime' is an act that is silly because it's like the sort of thing a child would do). We will then ask the student to repeat the utterance correctly.

Sometimes we ask students to correct each other. We might say Can anyone help Jarek/Krystyna? and hope that other students know the correct version of the utterance - after which the student who made the mistake should be able to say the sentence, question, or phrase accurately.

Student-to-student correction works well in classes where there is a genuinely co-operative atmosphere; the idea of the group helping all of its members is a powerful concept. Nevertheless it can go horribly wrong where the error-making individual feels belittled by the process, thinking that they are the only one who does not know the grammar or vocabulary. We need to be exceptionally sensitive here, only encouraging the technique where it does not undermine such students.

### C3 Feedback during fluency work

The way in which we respond to students when they speak in a fluency activity will have a significant bearing not only on how well they perform at the time but also on how they behave in fluency activities in the future (see Chapter 17c on how to counter negative expectations in productive skill activities). We need to respond to the content not just the language form; we need to be able to untangle problems which our students have encountered or are encountering, but these are things we may well do after the event, not during it. Our tolerance of error in fluency sessions will be much greater than it is during more controlled sessions. Nevertheless, there are times when we may wish to intervene during fluency activities, just as there are ways we can respond to our students once such activities are over.

**Gentle correction:** if communication breaks down completely during a fluency activity, we may well have to intervene. If our students cannot think of what to say, we may want to prompt them forwards. If this is just the right moment to point out a language feature we may offer a form of correction. Provided we offer this help with tact and discretion there is no reason why such interventions should not be helpful.

Gentle correction can be offered in a number of ways. We might simply reformulate what the student has said in the expectation that they will pick up our reformulation (see c2 above), even though it hardly interrupts their speech, for example:

Student: I am not agree with you ...  
 Teacher: I don't agree ...  
 Student: I don't agree with you because I think ...

It is even possible that students can learn something new in this way when they are making an attempt at some language they are not quite sure of.

We can use a number of other accuracy techniques of showing incorrectness too, such as echoing and expression, or even say I shouldn't say X, say Y, etc. But because we do it gently and because we do not move on to a 'getting it right' stage - our intervention is less disruptive than a more accuracy-based procedure would be.

Over-use of even gentle correction will, however, be counter-productive.

By constantly interrupting the flow of the activity, we may bring it to a standstill. What we have to judge, therefore, is whether a quick reformulation or prompt may help the conversation move along without intruding too much or whether, on the contrary, it is not especially necessary and has the potential to get in the way of the conversation.

Recording mistakes: as we saw in Chapter 4, b8, we frequently act as observers, watching and listening to students so that we can give feedback afterwards. Such observation allows us to give good feedback to our students on how well they have performed, always remembering that we want to give positive as well as negative feedback.

One of the problems of giving feedback after the event is that it is easy to forget what students have said. Most teachers, therefore, write down points they want to refer to later, and some like to use charts or other forms of categorisation to help them do this, as in the following example:

Grammar	Words and phrases	Pronunciation	Appropriacy

In each column we can note down things we heard, whether they are particularly good or especially incorrect or inappropriate. We might write down errors such as \*according to my opinion in the words and phrases column, or \*I haven't been yesterday in the grammar column; we might record phoneme problems or stress issues in the pronunciation column and make a note of places where students disagreed too tentatively or bluntly in the appropriacy column.

We can also record students' language performance on audio or videotape. In this situation the students might be asked to design their own charts like the one above so that when they listen or watch they too will be recording more and less successful language performance in categories which make remembering what they heard easier. Another alternative is to divide students into groups and have each group watch for something different - for example, one group focuses on pronunciation, one group listens for the use of appropriate or inappropriate phrases, while a third looks at the effect of the physical paralinguistic features that are used. If teachers want to involve students more - especially if they have been listening to audiotape or watching the video - they can ask them to write up any mistakes they think they heard on the board. This can lead to a discussion in which the class votes on whether they think the mistakes really are mistakes.

Another possibility is for the teacher to transcribe parts of the recording for future study. However, this takes up a lot of time!

After the event: when we have recorded student performance we will want to give feedback to the class. We can do this in a number of ways. We might want to give an assessment of an activity, saying how well we thought the students did in it, getting the students to tell us what they found easiest or most difficult. We can put some of the mistakes we have recorded up on the board and ask students firstly if they can recognise the problem, and then whether they can put it right. Or, as in the example above, we can write both correct and incorrect words, phrases, or sentences on the board and have the students decide which is which.

When we write examples of what we heard on the board, it is not generally a good idea to say who made the mistakes since this may expose them in front of their classmates. Indeed, we will probably want to concentrate most on those mistakes which were made by more than one person. These can then lead on to quick teaching and re-teaching sequences which arrive opportunistically in this way (see Chapter 11, a2).

Another possibility is for teachers to write individual notes to students, recording mistakes they heard from those particular students with suggestions about where they might look for information about the language - in dictionaries, grammar books, or on the Internet.

Now that you have read **Feedback during oral work**, answer the following questions:

- What is the value of communicative activities according to (a) Ellis, and (b) Swain?
- What reasons does Tony Lynch give for suggesting that correction during fluency work should take place 'as late as possible'?
- How many ways of 'showing incorrectness' are given here. Which three of them do you use most often, do you think?
- What, if any, are the dangers of student-student correction?
- What do you understand by 'gentle correction'?
- What technique is suggested for both accuracy and fluency work?
- How might teachers keep a record of student mistakes?

What suggestions are given for 'after the event'?