Giving and Receiving Feedback

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Abstract This article describes types of feedback and there are some tips to help supervisors to make the feedback effective. It also gives specific information to teachers about what they can do to make students interested in target language and improve their language skills. Effective feedback is dynamic, interactive and can improve performance and motivation of both teachers and students. Supervisors might have concerns that giving feedback is time consuming, repetitious and difficult when performance is poor, and could potentially cause tension in the supervisory relationship. To correct students' errors has always been, and will always be the concern of most teachers. Some teachers are in favor of immediate correction, while others are in favor of delayed correction. Some would even go further to consider the whole process as time consuming. In this article, I would like to dwell, based on my practical experience, upon this controversial issue to offer some suggestions for both immediate and delayed correction.

Keywords: correction, communication, conversation, encourage, negative feedback, positive feedback

1. Introduction

A lot of time and effort is spent on training courses and beyond in encouraging teachers to consider whether immediate or later correction of student errors during oral work is appropriate. There are a variety of good methods and techniques suggested for giving feedback. Mistakes are part of our life; we all make mistakes now and then. There is nothing wrong with making mistakes as long as we learn from them and avoid repeating them repeatedly.

Most students refuse to answer to the teacher in the classroom on the ground that they are most likely to be the laughingstocks of their class fellows. Consequently, they get discouraged and feel humiliated. They refrain from responding to the teacher's questions which may deprive them of a valuable learning opportunity. When students are corrected in front of their classmates, they feel offended and get discouraged. They expect teachers to correct them during classes. Failure to do so is likely to create confusion and suspicion on the part of the students. As such, teachers are expected to strive to find most creative ways to deal with this problem that most typically arises. They need to encourage and stimulate their students to participate in class without any fear of making mistakes.

2. Types of Mistakes and Their Correction

There are three types of oral mistakes that need to be corrected during class-discussion. These are: grammatical, vocabulary, and pronunciation mistakes. This leads us to a very important question: should we interrupt our students during discussion or avoid interrupting them as much as we can? To answer this question. we need to ask ourselves whether the focus is on accuracy or fluency. In fact, to save our students the embarrassment and in order not to distract them, we can employ less provocative approaches. One way is to make notes of the most common mistakes made by a student to be discussed later. Write them on the board without revealing the name of the student in order not embarrass him/her. Ask the rest of the class to identify these mistakes and correct them. Another way is to raise an eyebrow, or say, "Excuse me?" Alternatively, the teacher can ask for repetition without indicating the mistake.

In addition, we can employ another approach called, 'selective correction'. In this case, the teacher decides to correct only certain errors. These errors can be decided by the objectives of the lesson, or the exercise that is being done. In other words, if students are focusing on past simple tense, then only errors related to this grammatical area need to be corrected. Other mistakes are ignored.

2.1. What is Feedback?

Feedback is a means of giving information in a way that encourages the recipient to accept it, reflect on it, learn from it, and hopefully make changes for the better. Being able to give feedback is a skill that is useful in our personal and professional lives. Feedback is important to the ongoing development of learners in healthcare settings. Many clinical situations involve the integration of knowledge, skills and behaviors in complex and often stressful environments with time and service pressures on both teacher and learner. Feedback is central to

developing learners' competence and confidence at all stages of their medical careers. As a skill, feedback needs practice to improve. Specifically, feedback can:
- Clarify good performance
- Help develop self-assessment (reflection)
- Deliver high quality information
- Encourage dialogue
- Encourage motivational belief and self-esteem
- Provide opportunities to close the gap o Provide information to teachers to improve teaching
- Develop interpersonal communication

2.2. Feedback: Negative, Positive or Just Right

2.2.1. Elements of Effective Feedback

Effective feedback is dynamic, interactive and can improve performance and motivation. Supervisors might have concerns that giving feedback is time consuming, repetitious, difficult when performance is poor, and could potentially cause tension in the supervisory relationship. The tips below will help supervisors to make the feedback effective.

2.2.2. Giving Feedback

Tips to increase the usefulness of feedback include:
- ¬ Frequent - Feedback should be given regularly
- ¬ Timely – Ideally, feedback should be given close to the time of observation rather than later
- ¬ Appropriate – Feedback should be matched to the learners expected level of skill / knowledge
- ¬ Behavior specific – Feedback is given about the observed behavior rather than the person
- ¬ Balanced – Feedback should include both positive and corrective components
- ¬ Interactive – Feedback should be an interactive exchange between teacher and learner
- ¬ Constructive – Feedback should include solutions for areas of weakness and the learner should be involved in negotiating an action plan for ongoing learning and follow-up ?"
- ¬ Labelled – Ensure your learner understands that you're giving feedback by labelling it. Otherwise the message may be lost. (eg. Can I give you some feedback?)
- ¬ Appropriate setting – Positive feedback is effective when highlighted in the presence of patients or peers, but corrective feedback should be given in a more private setting

BAD: If you weren't so lazy you would have been prepared for the ward round

GOOD: "The ward round took longer than usual because you were under-prepared."

Some of us are good at giving positive feedback. Others are good at giving negative feedback. Not many seem skilled in providing both, what I call balanced feedback. Occasionally a client will tell me, "just tell it like it is. Be brutally honest." Alternatively, "you are just being nice." This makes me wonder if my feedback is too polite, or too subtle, even though I try to give it honestly and in a balanced fashion. Why? Let us look at what can happen when you give feedback, either too positive or too negative.

2.2.3. Too Little Positive Feedback

While working recently with a manager, I noticed that he tended to give mostly negative feedback, and very little positive. This manager stated that he had been taught that giving negative feedback would be more motivational. He also thought positive feedback seemed "too soft" and unnecessary. As he added: "Why should we praise people for just doing their jobs?"

When most or all feedback is negative, people know what you do not like, but they often have to guess at what you do like or want from them. They may feel overwhelmed and discouraged by the criticism, and they may take it personally. They are not ready minds, and so are often confused about what you really want. They may lose confidence, since everything they do seems wrong. In addition, if the only time they hear from you is when you have a complaint, they may soon begin to feel defensive, or try to avoid interactions with you.

That said negative feedback has its place. To be effective it needs to be specific and non-judgmental. Compare these two comments on a written report:
- "I can't believe you turned in such shoddy work. Don't you know any better?"
- "One of your conclusions was faulty and you had 3 typos on the report."

The first comment is shaming and demotivating. I feel bad, but I don't know what I should do differently. The second comment seems deliberately unemotional, so it takes the shame out of it. It also gives me specific information about what I can do to improve.

2.2.4. Too much Positive Feedback

If you are a big believer in positive feedback, or if you don't want to hurt people's feelings, you may be relying too much on positive feedback and fail to deliver the bad news. We have all heard about employees who received glowing performance reviews right up to the day they were let go for "performance issues." Obviously, there were problems that should have been addressed. If all you give is positive feedback, people can have an unrealistically high view of their worth and performance levels. Because they receive unbalanced feedback, they can have confidence beyond their actual performance levels.

Positive reinforcement certainly has its place, and to be effective it also needs to be specific and clear. Consider these two examples:
1. "Good job. Keep it up."
2. "Your report was clear, your conclusions were on target, and the writing was crisp and accurate."

The first comment may make me feel good, but I am not really sure what was right about my work. It might make me feel bad because you didn't even take time to notice what I did. In other words, the easy compliment seems canned and can come across as insincere. The second comment is all positive, but it tells me what was valued, and clearly shows that someone read my report.

2.2.5. Balanced Feedback

Balanced feedback provides feedback on what is being done in a proper way as well as what could be improved. The positive feedback builds confidence and reinforces the "good" behavior you want to see more of. It clarifies expectations. It feels good. The negative feedback is given factually and preferably with suggestions for improvement.

Consider this example of balanced feedback:

1. "Your report was clear, your conclusions were on target, and the writing was crisp and accurate. There were several typos, and for that I suggest more careful proofing. And one of your conclusions wasn't clear to me. Let's talk it over this afternoon and compare notes. Overall, great job!"

If you lead, coach or develop people, I suggest aiming for balanced feedback that builds confidence, shows the direction you want the performance to take, and highlights areas for improvement in a clear, non-punishing way. At the same time, note that people react differently. Some crave the honest feedback, and some crave the "feel good" aspects of positive feedback. Some remember and take to heart any criticism, and some live for it. So adjust accordingly, but always strive to be honest, sincere and matter-of-fact. By being honest and straightforward, and by offering balanced feedback, the people you influence can build skills and confidence at the same time.

2.2.6. How to Share Useful – and Respectful – Feedback

Feedback to employees is information regarding their performance and is information they can act on. Feedback must be shared in a manner that is understandable to them and is perceived by them as being provided in a highly respectful manner. Sharing feedback involves skills in effective listening, verbal and non-verbal communications, and working in multi-cultural environments. Consider the following guidelines, as well.

a. Be clear about what you want to say before you say it.

You might have already sensed what feedback you want to convey. However, you should be clear to yourself about what you want to convey and how you want to convey it.

b. Share your feedback in a concise and specific manner, then you can embellish.

People often lose specificity when they speak because they say far too much, rather than not enough. Or, they speak about general themes and patterns. When giving feedback, first share what you saw or heard, what you want instead, and how the person can achieve it. Then you can add more descriptive information if necessary.

c. Avoid generalizations.

Avoid use of the words "all," "never" and "always." Those words can seem extreme, lack credibility and place arbitrary limits on behavior. Be more precise about quantity or proportion, if you address terms of quantities, at all.

d. Be descriptive rather than evaluative.

Report what you are seeing, hearing or feeling. Attempt to avoid evaluative words, such as "good" or "bad." It may be helpful to quickly share your particular feeling, if appropriate, but do not dwell on it or become emotional.

e. Own the feedback.

The information should be about your own perception of information, not about the other's perceptions, assumptions and motives. Use 'I' statements as much as possible to indicate that your impressions are your own.

f. Be careful about giving advice.

When giving feedback, it is often best to do one thing at a time – share your feedback, get the person's response to your feedback, and then, when he/she is more ready to consider additional information, share your advice with him/her.

g. Tell them how many mistakes

This method is only really suitable for controlled speaking practice, but can be a very simple way of giving feedback in that situation. Examples include "Most of the comparatives were right, but you made two mistakes" and "Three words are in the wrong position in the sentence/ are mixed up". Make sure you only use this method when students can remember what you are referring to without too much prompting.

h. Use grammatical terminology to identify the mistake

For example, "(You used) the wrong tense", "Not the Present Perfect", "You need an adverb, not an adjective" or "Can change that into the passive/ indirect speech?" This method is perhaps overused, and you need to be sure that the grammatical terminology isn't just going to confuse them more.

i. Give the rule

For example, "'Since' usually takes the Present Perfect" or "One syllable adjectives make the comparative with –er, not more + adjective" This works best if they already know the rule, and you at least need to make sure that they will quickly understand what you are saying, for example by only using grammatical terminology you have used with them several times before.

j. Give a number of points

This is probably best saved for part of a game, especially one where students work together, but you can give each response a number of points out of 10. The same or other teams can then attempt at saying the same thing to see if they can get more points. If you don't want students to focus on accuracy too much, tell them that the points will also give them credit for good pronunciation, fluency, politeness, persuasiveness and/ or originality of ideas.

k. Just tell them they are wrong (but nicely)

Positive ways of being negative include "nearly there", "getting closer", "just one mistake", "much better", "good idea, but…", "I understand what you mean but…", "you have made a mistake that almost everyone does/ that's a very common mistake", "we haven't studied this yet, but…" and "much better pronunciation, but…" With lower level and new classes, you might have to balance the need to be nice with the need to be clear and not confuse them with feedback language that they don't understand, perhaps by sticking to one or two phrases to give feedback for the first couple of months. It can also be useful to give them translations of this and other classroom language you will use, for example on a worksheet or a poster.

3. Result

Some things to consider when giving feedback

1. Invite the individual to self-assess For instance, "what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your analysis?"

2. Comment on positives. Whenever possible, try to give some (genuine) positive feedback – it makes the negative easier to bear.

3. Focus on the behaviour not the person For instance, "I think that the draft you've given me needs more thorough editing here, and here", rather than "Your writing is really shoddy."

4. Be specific and clear; if possible, suggest concrete ways to make improvements For instance, "The proposed method does not align well with the methodology. Are there studies in the literature that can provide guidance?

5. Own the statement Use 'I' statements rather than 'you' statements, e.g. "I find your description confusing" rather than "you sound confused here".

6. Don't wait Immediate feedback is the most valuable. If this is not possible, give it as soon as you can.

7. Recognize that an immediate response to negative feedback may be defensive. Be prepared for these kinds of responses since without addressing them the feedback is unlikely to have much effect.

Feedback helps us to become more aware of what we do and how we do it. Receiving it gives us an opportunity to change and modify in order to become more effective. Some things to consider when receiving feedback

1. Self-assess your ideas and work beforehand Prepare some specific questions that you want the other person to provide feedback on.

2. Ask for help in finding solutions to the difficulties For instance, "Can you tell me what you think would work better?"

3. Remember that it is easy not to "hear" feedback, particularly if it's negative. There are several ways in which individuals may prevent themselves from taking in negative feedback. They may justify (e.g. "Well, you'd have done the same thing in that situation"), explain (e.g. "Well you don't really know the situation"), deny or become angry or hurt.

4. Remind yourself that all feedback, even negative, can be useful. Take notes so that you can think through more thoughtfully the specifics of any negative feedback you receive.

5. Check that you have fully understood the specifics of the feedback. For instance, "So the main things I should focus on …. is a way of remembering the correction as methods where you give more subtle clues. Its advantages are that it is quick and suits cultures, classes and students that think of elicitation as shirking by the teacher. It can also be more face-saving than asking them for self-correction, as trying to correct themselves risks making even more mistakes. The "right version" could mean the whole sentence or just the correction of the part that was wrong. In the latter case, you can then ask them to put it into the sentence in the right place and repeat the whole thing.

Many teachers, especially if they are new to teaching ESL classes, may be a little intimated by the prospect of having to teach pronunciation. But, just like almost every thing else, if the process is broken down into small manageable steps, the task is not all that daunting. This site is an attempt to do just that- to break the process of teaching pronunciation down into smaller steps.

Why is proper pronunciation important? Because without correct pronunciation- no matter how vast the students vocabulary may be, no matter how well the student understands and uses grammatical rules, no matter what their level of reading or writing skills may be- if they don't use correct pronunciation it may be very difficult for listeners to understand what they say. And that is a huge hindrance to communication. In addition, some research indicates that if a student can not pronounce a word correctly, they may not be able to hear it when spoken by another person either, which furthers hinders communication.

Students from different languages have different pronunciation difficulties. Not all sounds in the English language are common to other languages. For example, some languages do not have an 'r' sound, so students use a similar sound 'l' instead. So when a students says "What a lovely libbon", the native English is totally confused. Or maybe in a student's native tongue there is no distinction between 'b' and 'p'. Just imagine the misunderstanding that will result if a teachers says "I need to be on that bus" and the student hears "I need to pee on that bus".

When teaching pronunciation, teachers are giving feedback to their student about how they are saying things. This feedback includes what the problem is and what they need to do to correct it. This feedback may include where to place the tongue in the mouth to say particular words, or how the lips should be formed, or the action of the tongue when saying specific sounds.

Mastering proper pronunciation is not just a matter of learning individual sounds. Many students can hear and make the different sounds for all the vowels and consonants in English. Unfortunately, they also have to contend with the sound changes that occur with different letter combinations resulting from linking or reduction of vowels and consonants, not to mention stress, pitch, and intonation differences between their native tongue and English.

That's basically all there is to teaching pronunciation-giving feedback and ensuring that the student uses the feedback to improve their speaking skills. That along with providing adequate practice to the students to hear the sounds and practice making the sounds. Remember (as some research implies) if a student cannot say a sound, they will not be able to hear it either.

With oral mistakes made during class discussions, there are two schools of thought:

1) Correct often and thoroughly

2) Let students make mistakes. Sometimes, teachers refine the choice by choosing to let beginners make many mistakes while correcting advanced students often.

However, many teachers are taking a third route these days. This third route might be called 'selective correction'. In this case, the teacher decides to correct only certain errors. Which errors will be corrected is usually decided by the objectives of the lesson, or the specific exercise that is being done at that moment. In other words, if students are focusing on simple past irregular forms, then only mistakes in those forms are corrected (i.e., goed, thinked, etc.). Other mistakes, such as mistakes in a future form, or mistakes of collocations (for example: I made my homework) are ignored.

Finally, many teachers also choose to correct students after the fact. Teachers take notes on common mistakes that students make. During the follow-up correction session the teacher then presents common mistakes made so that all can benefit from an analysis of which mistakes were made and why.

Learning a language is a long process during which a learner will inevitably make many, many mistakes. In other words we take a myriad of tiny steps going from not speaking a language to being fluent in the language. In the opinion of many teachers, students who are continually corrected become inhibited and cease to participate. This results in the exact opposite of what the teacher is trying to produce - the use of English to communicate.

Look at these statements about correction of students' oral work. What do you think?

Advanced students need loads of correction, beginners hardly any. When you start to learn a language you need to be able to communicate imperfectly in lots of situations, not perfectly in a few. The teacher's job is to support learners as they blunder through a range of communicative scenarios, not badger them because they forget the third person -s. With advanced learners, the opposite is usually the case. The jury is out on the question of whether correcting students, however you do it, has any positive effect on their learning. There is some evidence, though, that time spent on correcting learners may be wasted.

Research into Second Language Acquisition has suggested that it may be that some language forms can be acquired more quickly through being given special attention while others may be acquired in the learners' own time, regardless of teacher attention. This helps explain, for example, why intermediate learners usually omit third person -s just like beginners, but often form questions with do correctly, unlike beginners.

There is little point-correcting learners if they do not have an immediate opportunity to redo whatever they were doing and get it right.

Learners need the opportunity for a proper rerun of the communication scenario in which they made the error, if they are to have any chance of integrating the correct form into their English. Whether the error was teacher-corrected, peer-corrected or self-corrected in the first place is of relatively minor importance.

Lots of learners and teachers think correction is important. Is this because it helps them to learn and teach or helps them to feel like learners and teachers?

4. Discussion

When two or more people are in the same place and are aware of each other's presence, then communication is taking place, no matter how subtle or unintentional. Without speech, an observer may be using cues of posture, facial expression, and dress to form an impression of the other's role, emotional state, personality and/or intentions. Although no communication may be intended, people receive messages through such forms of non-verbal behaviour. Much research has been done to try to break down interpersonal communication into a number of elements in order that it can be more easily understood. Commonly these elements include:

The Communicators

For any communication to occur there must be at least two people involved. It is easy to think about communication involving a sender and a receiver of a message. However, the problem with this way of seeing a relationship is that it presents communication as a one-way process where one person sends the message and the other receives it. While one person is talking and another is listening, for example.

In fact, communications are almost always complex, two-way processes, with people sending and receiving messages to and from each other simultaneously. In other words, communication is an interactive process. While one person is talking the other is listening - but while listening they are also sending feedback in the form of smiles, head nods etc.

The Message

Message not only means the speech used or information conveyed, but also the non-verbal messages exchanged such as facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures and body language. Non-verbal behaviour can convey additional information about the spoken message. In particular, it can reveal more about emotional attitudes which may underlie the content of speech.

Noise

Noise has a special meaning in communication theory. It refers to anything that distorts the message, so that what is received is different from what is intended by the speaker. Whilst physical 'noise' (for example, background sounds or a low-flying jet plane) can interfere with communication, other factors are considered to be 'noise'. The use of complicated jargon, inappropriate body language, inattention, disinterest, and cultural differences can be considered 'noise' in the context of interpersonal communication. In other words, any distortions or inconsistencies that occur during an attempt to communicate can be seen as noise.

5. Conclusion

The problem with some learners is they don't make enough mistakes.

Accurate but minimal contributions in speaking activities are unlikely to benefit learning as much as inaccurate but extended participation. Learners can be hampered by their own inhibitions and attitudes to accuracy and errors, the teacher's attitude and behavior (conscious or unconscious) to accuracy and errors or the restricted nature of the activities proposed by the teacher.

Teachers spend too much time focusing on what students do wrong at the expense of helping them to get things right.

When giving feedback to learners on their performance in speaking English, the emphasis should be done on motivating comments, like :

"Here are some things that people said in the last activity"

"I heard several people say this one"

"Can anyone correct this sentence? It has one missing word/ one word missing/ You need to add one word"

"The words are in the wrong order/ You need to change the words around/ change the word order/ mix the words up"

"This is a typical mistake for students from…"

"Don't worry, even native speakers make this mistake sometimes/ every nationality makes this mistake"

"This mistake is something we studied last week".

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