



Foreign Language Module **Inclusive Error Correction**

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The correction of student errors remains a subject of debate and research within the language teaching community. Attitudes cover a wide spectrum, from the view that errors must be avoided at all costs and corrected immediately and minutely, to the belief that teachers should direct their energy to more worthwhile pursuits than correcting errors, which are a necessary part of the learning process. In the communicative approach to language teaching, the perception of error falls somewhere in between these two extremes. Communicative instruction places the primary emphasis on successful communication rather than flawless grammar. Teachers typically incorporate grammatical principles into instruction in the context of authentic language use. It is understood that students will naturally make errors as they attempt to communicate, but it is also expected that they will improve their grammatical accuracy over the course of study. This expectation of improved accuracy necessitates some sort of error correction, though the amount and methods of correction vary widely from instructor to instructor.

Error correction is a complex and multifaceted topic. The questions it raises appear simple at first glance: *How many errors should be corrected? Which ones should be corrected? What method of correction is most effective? Is indirect feedback more beneficial to the student than direct feedback? Who should do the correcting: the student, a peer, or the instructor? Should the method or frequency of correction change with the students' proficiency level? Is it more important to correct written or verbal work?* However, multiple studies have attempted to answer these questions, with sometimes conflicting results. Two relevant points are widely accepted: first, that tolerating *some* error helps to foster confidence in students, and second, that periodic and systematic feedback helps students to progress. But the finer points of when and how to provide this feedback continue to be argued and studied.

This module does not aspire to provide answers to any of these questions. Rather, it discusses, in a general fashion, barriers that could prevent students with disabilities from

benefiting from the corrective feedback offered in class. It also suggests some strategies to overcome these barriers and make the classroom more inclusive. Error correction does not exist in a vacuum; as at least one study highlights, it always interacts with learner characteristics and other contextual features of instruction (DeKeyser, 1993). It is impossible to discuss without touching on issues like overall classroom practice, teacher-student relationships, and assessment. Some of these issues are more prominent in the setting of verbal work, while others come to the forefront in the context of written work. Thus, error correction in verbal work and error correction in written work will be treated separately here, though of course they overlap to a great extent in the classroom.

Error Correction in Verbal Work

In the communicative classroom, students are trained to use the target language through meaning-focused interaction rather than rote memorization or form-focused grammar practice. Much class time is spent on conversational practice. However, the focus on meaning over form has led to students' lack of accuracy when using the target language, as some researchers have discovered (Guvendir, 2011). Corrective feedback during practice activities helps students to recognize and fix their errors, leading to increased accuracy. Each instructor's preferences and methods, whether consciously considered or not, determine the amount, type, and frequency of feedback offered. Regardless of these factors, students with disabilities can experience barriers that prevent them from receiving optimal benefit from the corrective feedback offered by the instructor.

One barrier that students with disabilities may face is the physical setup of the classroom. Blocked visibility or a configuration of desks that makes hearing the instructor difficult can drastically reduce input for a language student. Traditional rows of desks can impede mobility, resulting in lessened participation in the "mingling" conversational activities so common in the communicative classroom. Rows of desks may also encourage a student with disabilities to sit far off to the side or in the back and thereby "slide under the radar" when it comes to student-instructor interaction. This is especially likely to occur if the instructor tends to stand at the front of the class instead of constantly circulating among students. One student commented in an interview that it is most helpful if the instructor is "in the middle, just trying to guide you along" (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). As the majority of verbal corrective feedback occurs during one-to-one student-instructor exchanges, the lack of this kind of interaction is a major barrier to receiving any benefit from the feedback. Fortunately, a little consideration on the instructor's part can go a long way in overcoming these barriers. Rearranging the desks in a circle or half-circle to encourage participation, moving objects that obstruct visibility, or simply making sure that each student receives the maximum amount of time in one-on-one conversation with the instructor are all ways of supporting the student in this situation.

Instructors often provide feedback on students' verbal work through nonverbal means: raised eyebrows, a shake of the head, or a slight lean forward can draw a student's attention to an error. Indeed, various studies assert that nonverbal communication may actually dominate classroom interaction (Guvendir, 2011). Instructors often use nonverbal actions to draw students' attention to errors before resorting to verbal signals. While these exchanges are typically immediate and informal, they can still present a barrier to students whose disability interferes with vision in general, with reading body language, or with comprehending and responding to social cues. The instructor can support these students simply by gaining an awareness of his or her own methods of nonverbal communication, paying careful attention during exchanges with students, and making nonverbal cues more explicit when it seems that a student is not responding to them.

Overall faculty disposition is a factor that may change how a student responds to error correction and impact its effectiveness. Since learning a new language is a daunting task for many people, it is important to lower students' "affective filters" so that they feel comfortable participating, taking risks, and making errors (Hallam, 2009). One student underscored this idea, saying that "it's really important not to intimidate a newcomer" to language learning (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). For students to receive and internalize error correction, especially on an ongoing basis, they need to feel that the teacher personally respects them and believes that they are capable of learning the language. Approachability and responsiveness to individual students' learning needs are several characteristics of effective professors valued by students with disabilities (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). Therefore, cultivating these attitudes and communicating them to students remain important tasks for the language teacher seeking to support all students.

A high level of anxiety in speaking the target language is common among students in the college language classroom, as evidenced by interviews. The anxiety seems to stem mainly from students' negative perceptions of their own abilities and the high-risk nature of the task of using new words and constructions in speech; comments like "I don't think I'm very good at it" and "you might say it wrong" were frequent (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). Furthermore, many students felt under pressure from the high standards of the course; one said that "the expectations seemed higher than I felt comfortable with" (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). Anxiety can be a barrier for students with and without disabilities. Promoting an atmosphere of positive encouragement in the classroom, setting very clear standards for oral work, and providing many low-pressure opportunities for practice are all steps that can help to mitigate it. Though tolerating some error in speech can help students gain confidence, instructors must strike a balance between this and helping students to improve their grammatical accuracy through feedback. Teachers must also be aware of students' varying levels of sensitivity toward being corrected in front of the class. Errors should be corrected in a non-judgmental way at all times.

Error Correction in Written Work

Written corrective feedback is usually a more standardized component of the curriculum than verbal error correction, and it is also a more common subject of pedagogical research. There are many differing opinions on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback, though recent research indicated its effectiveness for English learners (Vyatkina, 2010). In any case, nearly every college language curriculum incorporates writing assignments, and most use revision and correction of drafts as a tool for students to improve their accuracy and hone their writing skills in the target language. The potential barriers associated with written assignments differ from those associated with oral assignments, though the two can and do overlap in many cases. While oral assignments call to mind barriers related to classroom atmosphere, communication skills, and faculty characteristics, written assignments often present barriers for students whose disabilities affect processing and interpretation.

In contrast to verbal feedback and correction, which is typically immediate and informal, written error correction comprises part of a process that is sometimes used to formally assess students. Some of the principles for designing inclusive assessment can also be applied to the writing process in general and the editing phase in particular. First, it is important that instructors set very clear expectations as to what is required for the final product and what skills they will and will not be assessing. Many instructors are quite tolerant of error in verbal work, encouraging a student to take risks and say as much as he possibly can, only to take out the red pen and circle almost every word in the same student's composition. Teachers should only correct the errors in the material being assessed on the current assignment. Second, any rubrics, guidelines, or explanations of the system being implemented to mark errors and correct edited drafts should be organized, neat, and legible. Standard proofreading symbols are sometimes used to mark students' drafts and other teachers have their own written or symbolic systems; these need to be clearly explained to students.

There are many different kinds of feedback that teachers may offer on written work: direct (correcting the errors), indirect (marking them with a code that signals to the student what to correct, as in writing "Sp." under a spelling error), or simply circling the errors and letting the student determine how to correct them. Unless individual, detailed guidance is an option, the latter two methods may present barriers to some students. Students with disabilities that affect spelling or syntax may have great difficulty in identifying the nature of the error and correcting it. One study on written corrective feedback in beginning German classes showed that while different feedback types all lead to improved accuracy, direct feedback results in the greatest accuracy (Vyatkina, 2010). Providing this type of feedback is one way to support students with learning disabilities on their writing assignments. If the instructor wishes to avoid direct feedback, writing more detailed comments in conjunction with indirect feedback may help, or simply being available for guidance and direction during the editing phase.

Finally, no discussion of error correction would be complete without mentioning the subject of peer editing, a fairly common practice in language classes. As with any group work, peer editing can be a barrier or a support to students with disabilities. Some students may feel a lowered sense of pressure when a classmate rather than a teacher is doing the editing, and may enjoy and appreciate the input from peers. Conversely, others may feel discomfort when a peer they don't know well is critiquing their paper, or feel anxiety about their own ability to offer suggestions to a classmate – as one student stated, “if you're struggling you don't want to bring everyone else down” (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). A student with a disability that affects reading or visual processing may have significant difficulty identifying errors in another's composition. There are many ways of making the peer editing process more inclusive; one is simply to be available for one-on-one guidance for students who need help in identifying errors. One possible way to lower the social anxiety barrier is to let students have some input in the process of choosing their partners. Another is to have multiple students edit each paper, and allow both the drafts and the editing and commentaries to be anonymous. Of course, allowing individuals the option to correct their own papers instead of another student's is an easy solution that may be more beneficial to some. While the efficacy of peer editing is debated by teachers, multiple studies have shown that self-editing leads to superior writing products (Vyatkina, 2010).

Summary

The many facets of error correction in the language classroom make it an important consideration for the instructor who wishes to foster inclusivity. Some of the issues which surround error correction in verbal work and may introduce barriers to students are physical constraints, nonverbal interaction, overall faculty disposition, and student anxiety. Written error correction implicates issues of formal assessment and interpretation of various systems of feedback, as well as the social factors inherent in the question of peer editing. Instructors can lower or abolish many of the barriers related to error correction by fostering a welcoming instructional climate, forming positive relationships with students, setting clear expectations, and designing straightforward systems of assessment – or, in other words, simply by implementing the principles of Universal Design for Instruction.

References

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