

Feedback: what is it and who is it for?

Kat Robb considers learner preferences in terms of feedback.

The inspiration for this article originates from talks I have given about reflective practice. Reflection is one of most effective ways I have found to personally discover how to contribute to the overall improvement of my learners' learning and performance, in addition to my own teaching practice.

At the time, my teaching context was in a language school in Barcelona, teaching the Cambridge main-suite exams. When correcting pieces of writing I had set learners for homework, I noticed that I was repeatedly correcting the same errors time and again. I tried selecting the main common errors and spending time during class to review them and give learners the opportunity to correct together open-class with their peers, and identify why the specific error examples were selected. I found this kind of error correction discovery exercise effective in class time, but when the next submission of writing was handed in, the same errors appeared again.

This led me to believe that either the error correction I was doing with the learners was ineffective, or that the feedback I gave on their pieces of writing was purposeless. I engaged in some reflective practice, and therefore made the decision to undertake some action research to learn how to better support my learners. Using both of these features as springboards, I decided to ask one of my classes a few questions at the end of the lesson, to gain a sense of where they thought improvements could be made with error correction and teacher feedback.



Open-class questions:

1. Do you feel you are improving your writing?
2. Do you pay attention to errors pointed out by the teacher?
3. Do you read the feedback comments on your writing?

I asked the questions orally open-class, and requested a show of hands in response. Half of the class raised their hands for question 1. For question 2, there was a sprinkling of hands, with a few hands dropped in response to question 3. I admit this wasn't a foolproof piece of research, but it certainly opened my eyes to the fact that feedback wasn't even being read, let alone put into practice. I was pleased that my class were open to being asked, and were prepared to reflect briefly themselves regarding what they thought about error correction and feedback.

It was clear that in order to identify courses of action for how to improve learner writing, I needed to make changes to my teaching practice regarding the role of feedback in written

work. I decided I would design a written questionnaire that could be completed anonymously, which I would distribute to all my learners. My main goal was to help learners move forward and develop along their path of language learning, so in order to do this I needed to identify the courses of action for how to realise this, and support them in reaching their learning goals and targets, ultimately, to successfully pass the Cambridge writing paper.

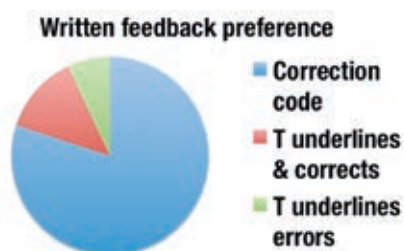
I carried out some research and background reading about giving feedback in the English language-learning classroom, and decided to focus on corrective feedback to enhance performance. My intention was to use this approach for formative and summative assessments, as well as informal written homework and class tasks. My aim was to help make learners aware of what they were doing 'now' and where they were, and ignite a consciousness of what they could improve in the future. In order to do this, both strengths and weaknesses would be identified to be able to identify action points to carry forward and use as a starting block for improvement.

I designed the following questionnaire to consider how I could improve the role of feedback on written work.

Select an option from 1–3 below which best describes your preference for error correction. Please also say why you have chosen this method.

1. Teacher highlights or underlines the error so you are aware of it, but you have to work out why it is incorrect for yourself and correct it.
2. The teacher uses a correction code: e.g. 'v' and you know that it means the verb is incorrect or the tense is wrong.
3. The teacher underlines and corrects all the errors for me.
4. What do you think the advantages or disadvantages are of the three methods listed above?
5. Do you prefer oral or written feedback from your teacher?

The results for the first three questions can be seen in the pie chart below. I was quite surprised that learners responded their preferred method of error correction to be the use of a correction code. At the beginning of each course, I collect a piece of writing from all learners and design an error correction code based on the problem areas that come to light. I then explain the code to my classes and explain how it will be used to give feedback on written work. I very rarely see the errors annotated by symbols from the code actually corrected by learners, so it shocked me to see this was the chosen method of preference. The next step was obviously to delve deeper into the reason why this has gained most preference. Some learners wrote the reasons why on their questionnaires, but not all, so I held a short discussion at the end of class to give them the opportunity to have their



Written feedback preference	Positive attributes	Negative attributes
Teacher underlines errors	Ss aware but still have to think for themselves	Difficult for Ss to know what to correct so they maybe don't correct Easy to repeat errors if not corrected again T needs to review again so time-consuming
Teacher underlines and corrects error	Ss immediately aware of error so saves them time	Ss don't discover/think so can repeat Makes Ss lazy so less effective
Teacher uses correction code	Quick for teacher Detects error type so easier for Ss to identify where the problems are Ss can recall errors using the code Ss aware of error type so easier to correct Ss correct for themselves	

Figure 1.

say, and put the learning decisions in the hands of the learners. The feedback can be seen in Figure 1.

Interestingly, according to the students, there were no negative attributes for using the error correction code; all they actually needed to do was commit to correcting the errors. This was something we discussed in class, and I fostered by providing class time for error correction of peer writing. I found this motivated learners more, and kept them alert, rather than re-reading their own pieces of work to correct. I monitored to overview the corrections and oversee any potential questions. Finally, the answers to question 5 above were more or less equally distributed, so I ensured that I always provided a general feedback comment on written work, in addition to asking each learner individually if they had any questions regarding their feedback, and of course praising their efforts.

Undertaking this classroom research was fruitful for many reasons, firstly because it encouraged me to engage in my own reflective practice and action research. Including my learners in the research process and conducting informal feedback sessions allowed them the opportunity to contribute towards finding an effective method to help improve their writing together with their teacher, based not only on their viewpoint, but their

personal learning experiences. I continue to use an error correction code for my classes, and I continue to involve my learners in the decision-making process regarding the most appropriate method for error correction for them, based on their feedback.

Bibliography

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