Providing Positive Error Correction

Amy Jones

Colorado State University
PROVIDING POSITIVE ERROR CORRECTION

In the environment of an ESL classroom where new vocabulary is being introduced, it is with careful consideration that instructors decide when and how to correct errors. Error correction must be presented carefully to ensure a positive and effective learner affect. Students need error correction to ensure improvement in language acquisition and it is the instructor’s responsibility to maintain a balance in the flow of the lesson, while maintaining their student’s confidence in their abilities to learn. Creating opportunities for students to express and understand meaningful language should be the optimal goal for classroom activities. Along with this, focusing on form through instruction and positive error correction are also essential for students to experience continued growth in their language development.

Positive error correction is a possibility within the classroom, and should be presented in a sensitive and helpful manner. The first step to understanding when and how to provide error correction is understanding a student’s level of proficiency and their progress. This will allow the instructor to determine where an error or a mistake has been made. When the instructor gains an understanding of their student’s, they can better recognize and differentiate these errors from mistakes, which will allow them to determine whether to correct the error or let the mistake go. Other characteristics are important in determining who the learner is, which will aid in the selection and timing of error correction. An instructor should be attuned to the learner’s confidence level. This can make a big impact when trying to provide error correction, and where the balance of maintaining that student’s confidence can be thrown off. Over-correction for any learner can result in loss of motivation and then hesitant speaking. This hesitancy could then lead to stuttering and constant reliance on the instructor for confirmation.

There are many considerations instructors should make when handling error correction. One consideration is determining whether the student is making a mistake or an error. If the
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Student makes an incorrect utterance, and is able to recognize it, it is not an error but rather a mistake that they will most likely catch. If the instructor notices a student making this mistake numerous times, this is when it becomes an error and could benefit from correction and further practice. According to the text, How Languages are Learned, errors can be adopted through developmental patterns, therefore correction may only be needed when the learner is ready for it (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). During this development, consistent correction may be necessary. However, excessive error correction can have negative effects on learners. Some learners need immediate reaction to errors, whereas others might get discouraged and embarrassed. It is beneficial for the instructor to gain a better picture of their students, in order to differentiate the error correction needs of their learners. Students might also be more likely to catch their mistake if the language form is the focus of instruction for that day (Parrish, 2004).

As an instructor, at the beginning of a class, I would start with a basic correction strategy that prompts awareness of mistakes without correcting the mistake for my students. The indirect way to respond to an error, known as recast, is one of the most common forms of error correction (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). I would use this to keep the flow of the communication while still providing my students with the correct phrase. A problem with this type of correction strategy is that students might not pick up on the correction part, but rather view the instructors repeated phrase as confirmation. Depending on their level, they might not even hear the difference in the phrase or where the correction was emphasized. A way to avoid this miscommunication would be to develop a signal that the students were aware of. A simple hand gesture signaling that when the phrase is being repeated, they should be listening for a correction. In my response I would use the correct form. Once they hear the phrase spoken correctly, they can repeat with their correction. An example of this, which is similar to the example used in the text, Teaching Adult
ESL (Parrish, 2004, p. 79), would be asking a student how long they have lived in Fort Collins. If their response contains an error such as “I be here for two years”, I would respond by first using the hand signal and then answering the question myself with an emphasis on the correction, such as “I’ve been here for five years”. The signal would prompt the students to listen for the correction in my phrase (Parrish, 2004).

While some researchers will argue that recasts have negative implications on a learner’s development, other recent arguments claim that the learning benefits are attributed to positive evidence. These assumptions are that second language learners are able to recognize the corrective intent of recasts; however, the learner’s ability to perceive the recast as corrective feedback relies largely on the characteristics of the recast, such as length and pronunciation (Bao, Egi, & Han, 2011). The learner’s response to feedback is known as uptake (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Recast is where the instructor reformulates the learner’s utterance, minus the error. If the learner is able to recognize this and respond by repeating the utterance again with intent to correction, this is considered uptake (Bao, Egi, & Han, 2011). One study observed that the majority of instructor’s responses to learner’s errors were recasts and that the learners immediately reacted to most of these. The frequency of recasts and learners responses led to the conclusion that learners do notice and respond to these recasts which positively contribute to their language development (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Error correction strategies help students focus on form within a meaning-focused activity because it allows them to see the difference between their production and target (Rodríguez, 2009). Another strategy called the garden path technique, introduces a grammatical rule to learners that presents situations where they may overgeneralize and therefore can consider the correct form. This technique encourages learners to carry out a cognitive comparison between
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their utterances and the correct target-language utterances. One example of this is to provide students with a sentence using two words such as *think* and *problem* and the sentence would be “I thought about the problem.” Next I would ask the students to make a sentence using the words *talk* and *problem*, and they might respond with a sentence such as “we talked about the problem.” Then I would give them the words *argue* and *result*, where they might say “we argued the result.” Finally I would give them the words *discuss* and *advantages* and they might say “we discussed about the advantages.” It is here that I would correct them by explaining that we do not use the word *about* with *discuss*. The students are corrected and made aware of an exception to a grammatical rule. These short sentences that include common error types will help students to make comparisons and correct themselves more effectively in the future (Rodríguez, 2009).

These strategies encourage the goal of self-correction. When students learn how to correct their mistakes consciously, it aids in their development and proficiency of the language. The ability to self-correct means that students can obviously understand their mistake, catch it, and make the necessary adjustments. This builds awareness of the language and develops learners into more self-sufficient speakers. In my class, I would try to prompt and promote self-correction by signaling mistakes and allowing for students to catch them first. By using strategies such as recasts, it engages the learner to think about the language and stimulate self-correction, which has a longer lasting impact on their learning and development.

Adults ESL learners are likely to recognize correction and feedback on their errors. Their goals are set to learn the new language and they typically take equal responsibility in the learning experience. I believe that positive error correction is important in their development, motivation, and confidence. Strategies such as recasting, if done correctly, do not alienate or hurt the student who has made an error in their utterance, but rather it can have a positive effect on that student
and the rest of the class. Using a signal where the choice of sign is created or negotiated with the learners, will assure that they understand the representation of when a correction is being made, and can effectively learn from their own incorrect utterances and from those of their classmates.
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References


