

Giving Feedback to Language Learners

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Abstract: Feedback is an essential part of effective learning and teaching foreign languages. Feedback helps students understand the subject being studied and gives them clear guidance on how to improve their learning. In this article we discuss some techniques of giving feedback in providing students engagement and to enhance learning and improve assessment performance.

Key words: feedback, language, learning, teaching, technique, assessment

Feedback is information that a learner receives about their language learning and most commonly refers to information about their language production (speaking and writing), although it can also concern reading and listening, study skills, attitudes, effort and so on. This article focuses on feedback on speaking and writing, with most attention given to the latter,¹ and all the research discussed here concerns adult or teenage learners. Whilst some of this is relevant to learners of all ages, feedback with younger learners at less advanced stages of cognitive, social and emotional growth needs to be approached rather differently

In practice, there are often a number of differences between feedback on speaking and on writing. The former is often less direct, more immediate and more public than the latter, but it is possible to describe a set of characteristics of effective feedback that are common to both.

Although feedback is often seen first and foremost as the drawing of attention to errors, it has been found in general educational contexts that feedback on correct responses is more effective than feedback on incorrect responses (Hattie, 2009, p. 175). It is all too easy in the course of a lesson to focus on errors and miss positive contributions (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 124), but learners need to know when they are doing something well. What is more, when feedback is public (for example, during or after a speaking activity), confirming that a student has produced accurate and appropriate language in a particular instance (such as their having avoided a very common mistake) is likely to benefit both the individual student and others in the class, who will have their attention drawn to the language item in question (Ur, 2012, p. 91). More generally, it can be said that feedback is most effective when it is given in the context of a supportive, non-threatening learning environment. Teachers have to balance different linguistic and interpersonal objectives when deciding what kind of feedback to give, how to give it and who to give it to (Hyland & Hyland, 2019a, p. 5), so they invariably adopt some sort of stance towards their students. The giving of feedback can be a sensitive moment. Knowing that students will respond to it in different ways (and some will feel threatened), many teachers seek to soften feedback by focusing, in part, on the positive (Rinvoluceri, 1994, p. 288)

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Teachers may also try to limit the potential damage of negativity by using what is known as the 'feedback sandwich', where positive feedback is presented first, followed by more critical comments, before being rounded off with more positive feedback. Although popular as a feedback strategy, there is little evidence that it is effective. The manner of feedback delivery will also play an important role. Many teachers instinctively feel that it is best to tone down the force of critical

comments by using vague language or avoiding personal pronouns and imperatives (Hyland & Hyland, 2019b, p. 168). Desirable as this may be, the danger is that the feedback may be misunderstood. Non-verbal behavior (facial expressions, eye movements, body postures) may also be used by teachers to soften the directness of feedback, but it is difficult to make clear recommendations in this area, given both the lack of research (Nakatsukasa & Loewen, 2017, p. 169) and the number of individual and cultural variables. There are, however, two areas where researchers are unambivalent. In normal school classroom contexts, rewards (in the form of stickers or badges, for example) correlate negatively with both task performance and enhanced motivation, and should not, perhaps, be thought of as feedback at all (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 84). Likewise, authoritarian feedback, which is negative in content and manner and which discourages discussion, will do little to motivate learners; nor will it help them develop their language proficiency.

Perhaps most importantly, feedback needs to be considered as an integral part of the approach to teaching. It is not just 'a decoration on the cake or an additional asset that's worth having' (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 123). It defines and exemplifies a teacher's approach to their work: to teach is to provide feedback (Fanselow, 1987, p. 267). Experiments with feedback strategies are, therefore, one of the most powerful forms of teacher development. Feedback defines and exemplifies a teacher's approach to their work: to teach is to provide feedback.

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