

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Tailor your feedback

by Roomana Khan (Tutor, Failte Isteach Kilkenny)

Feedback on oral performance: it's something we teachers indulge in day in and day out but it begs the question: How effective is our feedback? I'll sheepishly admit that for a long time, my repertoire of oral feedback was limited to "Well done!", "Excellent!", "Good" etc., however, it wasn't until the investigation of my teaching practice (with respect to oral feedback) did I explore various types of feedback (other than the ones mentioned above!) and their merits.



Oral Corrective Feedback

Let's start with oral corrective feedback; which according to Li (2014) refers to the response we give to learners' erroneous second language utterances. I had always assumed that it was important to correct all errors; to prevent them from becoming fossilised. However, I learnt that this may not be the case. In the communicative classroom, global errors (major errors which can cause a breakdown in communication) may be checked, whereas local errors (small errors that do not hinder communication) could go unchecked. Hence, 'It's a fast all over' would qualify as a global error as it is uninterpretable. On the other hand, 'You should demand a fat salary.' would be a local error (as the intended meaning can be figured out despite the humorous image it evokes).

The way that you say it:
Making feedback
positive and motivating

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Affective Feedback

Next, we have affective feedback. Brown (2014) defines affective feedback as one that maintains a relationship between the learner and the teacher/listener. I found out that positive affective feedback encourages the learner to continue, whereas negative affective feedback signifies termination of the conversation. Personally, I feel positive affective feedback can go a long way in urging the learner to go on despite errors. Therefore, feedback such as "Yeah, you're fine", "Do you want to say that again?" tone of voice and facial expression can lower the learner's anxiety and give them confidence to continue their output.

Cognitive Feedback

Let's explore cognitive feedback. According to Brown (2014) cognitive feedback indicates comprehension of an utterance; positive cognitive feedback signifies comprehension, whereas negative cognitive feedback indicates lack of understanding. I believe it is important to maintain a balance between positive and cognitive feedback to encourage learners to continue their output and to curtail major errors. Negative cognitive feedback could include comments such as: "I didn't get that", "Sorry?" which in turn could steer learners to focus on comprehensibility. On the other hand, positive cognitive feedback could comprise utterances like "Hmm" and "Yeah." Also non-verbal communication, like a nod could be an effective form of positive cognitive feedback.

"I feel positive affective feedback can go a long way in urging the learner to go on despite errors."

Positive Motivational Feedback

Another important form of oral feedback is positive motivational feedback; this may be defined as feedback that leads to enhanced learner self-esteem. In my opinion positive motivational feedback, which tells the learner specifically what is being commended, could lead to better awareness about learning. Brophy in Wong et al (2009) supports this point and offers a three-pronged approach with regards to praise; the contingency of praise with the performance in question, the specification of the behaviour being commended and sincerity. So, what about feedback tokens such as 'very good' (my most favoured form of oral feedback in yester years!)? I feel, even though, such positive utterances may provide lower levels just the right amount of encouragement, they should be used judiciously. I agree with Wong et al who suggest following correct answers in a simple non-verbal manner and pursuing with questions like "Why do you say that?" Also, as Wong et al suggest, wider participation might be encouraged by following a correct answer with questions like: "Do you all agree?" "Anyone else?".

Conclusion

My journey of self-reflection has lead me to gain an understanding of various types of oral corrective feedback; I learnt that global errors can be given attention in the communicative classroom, positive affective feedback can be combined with the most suitable form of cognitive feedback and positive motivational feedback can be used wisely. It is recommended that we

try to orchestrate an array of oral feedback types in accordance with our context and our students' needs. Finally, I have compiled a brief list of good feedback practice.

Good Feedback fosters an atmosphere of trust and empathy which in turn could lead to enhanced learner self-esteem. Errors are viewed as indicators of learners' developing competence and feedback is seen as an opportunity to gauge learners' ability and to spur them on the path to communicative competence (Brown:2014). It is honest, sensitive and tactful. Praise is based on merit and helps clarify what good performance is. It is not doled out at every possible opportunity. Tact is the key here – well seasoned comments help preserve the learners vulnerable 'self'. Lee et al (2016) support this view. It delivers information to students about their learning. It specifically targets the exact area being commended and fosters teacher-student dialogue around learning; where feedback is like a two-way conversation between the teacher and the student. Wong and Waring (2009) share this opinion. It is motivational.

Language learning can be a daunting task for learners. Judicious words of encouragement, in my view, can have a very positive effect on learners' motivation. It is based on observations of teachers which could provide valuable information about where and what kind of feedback is provided. I believe observations conducted by more than one colleague could shed light on different dimensions of the feedback one offers. In fact, it was with the help of observations by my colleagues, and video recordings of my lessons that I reviewed the type of feedback I provide. Finally, critical reflection and self-evaluation can contribute to good feedback practice. The investigation of our own practice in the arena of oral feedback can equip and enable us to adjust our feedback and narrow the gap between actual and ideal practice. Lee et al (2016: 5) put it so aptly: "Teachers... should aim to become more critical and reflective of their own practice. This will allow them to tailor their feedback according to what is needed, rather than what they assume is needed."

Further Reading

Brown, D.H and Brown, H.D. (2014) Principles of language learning and teaching: A course in second language acquisition. 6th edition. United States: Pearson Education (US).

Lee, H. H, Leong, A. P. and Song, G. (2016) Investigating teacher perceptions of feedback. *ELT Journal* 47:1-9.

Li, S. (2014). Oral corrective feedback. *ELT Journal*. 68 /2:196-19

Wong, J. and Waring, Hansun, Z. (2009) 'Very good' as a teacher response. *ELT Journal*. 63/3:195-203

“Cognitive feedback indicates comprehension of an utterance; positive cognitive feedback signifies comprehension, whereas negative cognitive feedback indicates lack of understanding. (Brown, 2014)”

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