

Learning from Our Mistakes:

Making Students Notice

Keli Ramos, Aston University

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This dissertation reports on a research project designed to investigate the type of tasks that support students in noticing their errors. In the study, learners from two low-intermediate and two high-intermediate classes recorded, transcribed, evaluated, and self-corrected their spoken output over a three-day period. The participants are international students from 15 different countries. Their ages range from 18 to 52 years old.

Four different noticing tasks were introduced to the students. First, students' own spoken output acted as a noticing task. Students were asked to transcribe their spoken output, giving them the opportunity to focus on what they could not say and also on the fluency of their talk. Second, evaluation questions were asked in order to prompt students to notice the gap between personal linguistic production and the target language. Next, self-correction was used to help students access their declarative knowledge and reveal to both student and teacher if an error was due to deficient declarative knowledge, underdeveloped procedural knowledge, or lack of learning strategy. Finally, teacher-focused corrective feedback was provided with the aim of having students compare erroneous correction attempts with a correct example.

Responses to evaluation questions and self-correction attempts on transcribed output provide the data for this report. There are two different sets of evaluation questions: the first set of questions solicits students to evaluate their speaking skills, and the second set relates to the process of self-correction and receiving teacher corrective feedback. Both evaluations ask student to *strongly agree*, *agree*, *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, or *neither agree nor disagree*. The responses for individual questions are combined for each level so that the final numbers for low-intermediate and high-intermediate students can be analyzed. Similarities and differences among each class level are examined and discussed. In addition, students' self-corrected output is analyzed. Circled mistakes and correction attempts are totaled and become the basis for analysis. Success of students' noticing abilities and self-correction skills are determined by how many errors they notice, partially or erroneously correct, and successfully correct.

The data from the study reveal that these different tasks elicit noticing of a variety of linguistic features. In particular, evaluation questions cause students to notice their lack of fluency, vocabulary, and also their strong accents. In other words, evaluation questions allow students to pay attention to more than just their grammar performance, which they typically focus on, and which has been the subject of most research into the value of noticing tasks.

The results from self-correction show that students have a strong ability to identify and amend errors without the aid of the teacher and regardless of academic level. These abilities are related to learning strategy skills rather than linguistic level that all students have the potential to utilize. Self-correction is highly beneficial because it respects the principle of learner readiness. What is more, self-correction was found to be a successful precursor to teacher corrective feedback as it maximizes a student's readiness to comprehend and process these corrections.

Potential Impact

This study has the potential to provide strong impact in the areas of error correction pedagogy and therefore in teacher education programmes. The relevant outcomes from my research are:

- students are able to notice a range of errors in their linguistic output ranging from lack of fluency, to mistakes with grammar, and ineffective use of vocabulary
- learner readiness is an important factor in error correction being effective
- self-correction provides an effective precursor to teacher correction.

As the literature has shown, corrective feedback is more complicated than simply amending students' errors. There are many forms of teacher error correction on both oral and written output. From reformulations to recasts, explicit to implicit error correction, and error feedback to clarification requests, research addressing these types of corrections has produced mixed results. Is there a form of corrective feedback that is effective?

One problem with providing error correction to students is that corrective feedback often goes unnoticed or does not influence students' interlanguage development. This is related to the theory of learner readiness which explains that students will process and use for acquisition only language that is developmentally suitable. The problem with teacher corrective feedback is that the student must be at a stage that is appropriate for the particular point that is being corrected.

If learner readiness is the problem, having teachers make corrections only to those errors that students have already noticed can alleviate this dilemma. Noticing in this situation acts as a marker of a learner's developmental stage and a signal to the teacher as to what she or he should focus on. Therefore, teacher error correction should be preceded by student error correction and corrective feedback should only focus on errors students have noticed.

It is also important to consider the students in the correction process. Students' treatment of their errors helps indicate the source of their mistakes. For example, errors that are noticed but not attempted to correct could imply that there is a deficiency in a student's declarative knowledge. If a student erroneously or partially corrects a mistake, then there could be a defect in his or her declarative knowledge. Mistakes that a student is able to correct indicate that there is a problem with procedural knowledge rather than declarative knowledge. Finally, errors that remain unnoticed signify that the student is not developmentally ready to attend to those linguistic items. Using students' self-corrected output can help direct a teacher's corrective feedback to ensure that students are ready to focus on their particular mistakes.

The research and findings presented in this project are important as error correction remains a hotly debated topic and is covered in many teacher education manuals and on teacher education programmes such as CELTAs, DELTAs and even Master's. However, while the research into error correction has shown that oral and written corrections are in most cases ineffective; teachers, nonetheless, continue to apply the red pen in the hope that students will consequently 'fix' their mistakes, probably due to our own beliefs about language learning and also to satisfy the expectations of our students. In other words, there is a disjuncture between theory and practice. This research suggests that focusing on mistakes can be effective if students are involved in the process from language production

to error correction. The research, then, provides both a rationale for error correction and an effective process for its introduction.