

Reference for citations: Kozlova, Inna (2010) “Ellis's corrective feedback in a problem-solving context” *ELT Journal* 64/1, doi: 10.1093/elt/ccp064. The following is the author’s post-print version. Page numbers correspond to the printed version to allow for citations.

READERS RESPOND

Ellis’s corrective feedback in a problem-solving context

Inna Kozlova

Are there teachers in the profession who have never wondered whether their corrections are having the desired effect? Will corrections help students to improve, or will learners have a quick look at them and not learn anything? What kind of corrective feedback (CF) is best for students? Ellis (2009) presents a variety of options available to teachers as a basis for exploring the effects of different CF types. He distinguishes between two sets of options: one related to strategies for providing feedback and the other to students’ response to feedback, and examines the relevant research. He reminds us that: ‘CF can only have an impact if students attend to it’.

Bearing this in mind, we would suggest it could be useful to situate CF within a problem-solving framework. This is because the effort made by students in assuming responsibility within the problem-solving process guarantees their involvement and is more likely to have positive consequences on their future performance. In this context, we will focus on problem detection and finding a solution to the problem as two essential parts of the problem-solving process. We will demonstrate that CF, in general, aims at covering this process only in part. This is because teachers expect students to provide the ‘missing link’.

The very presence of mistakes in students’ work suggests two possibilities: that students’ existing knowledge has been insufficient for them to detect a problem or that students detected a problem but were unable to solve it. Let us consider the two possibilities and the corresponding types of CF provided by teachers.

Problem detection

Detecting a problem depends on picking up certain clues suggesting there is a problem. We could ask ourselves about the students’ ability to generate and pick up these clues. When checking their own or their peers’ work for mistakes, students are only able to detect a problem if they are aware of the corresponding norms themselves. This basically means that problem detection has to be done by ‘more capable others’, in Vygotsky’s words. The teacher may provide help with the detection by either underlining the error or indicating the line but leaving it to the student to locate the error (see the two subtypes of Ellis’ Indirect Feedback). The extent to which the student is helped should be determined by the teacher: when students have more knowledge, less help needs to be provided. Among those who advocate Indirect CF are Ferris (2006) arguing in favour of locating errors

(rather than labelling or coding them) and Chandler (2003) who sees it as the second most effective type of all.

By providing help with error detection, the teacher hopes the students will be able to solve the problem on their own. However, when the students' knowledge is low, the teacher cannot expect them to both locate and solve the problem. The type of CF defined as Reformulation by Ellis allows students to detect their mistakes using the whole reformulated text as support. This approach reduces pressure on the students as regards the effort required from them. In contrast to Indirect Feedback, which provides detection but not the solution, Reformulation provides the solution leaving detection to the student.

Problem solving

After the problem is located (and not ignored), individuals attempt to resolve it. To do so, they try to classify the problem, that is, to identify it with others they have previously encountered and proceed by applying familiar solutions.

Providing a ready answer, as in the classic form of CF (Ellis' Direct CF), cannot be considered 'help' in the strict sense of the word. Both stages of the problem-solving process are covered by the teacher, which requires little processing on the part of the student. Chandler (2003) reports on his students' feelings of not participating. Students' satisfaction with such CF can be explained by their choice of least effort, and we could ask ourselves if it is also the case of the teachers who want to 'wash their hands' as soon as possible.

To help students at the problem-solving stage without providing a ready solution some teachers offer error codes (Ellis' Metalinguistic CF). However, the categories offered by teachers as error codes are too scarce and sometimes it is necessary to include other written comments making reference to certain rules or exercises. Let us consider possible CF on three mistakes:

- 1 'high* education'
- 2 'actual' meaning 'current'
- 3 'floor' meaning 'flat'.

For my students, underlining 'high' would be sufficient as we have done a lot of class work on 'high school' as contrasted to 'higher education'. In contrast, mere underlining of 'actual' could bewilder weaker students, so I would add the 'false friend' error code to remind them of the rule. In the case of 'floor', a 'ww' code is too general and no other error code describes what could be called a 'false dictionary friend' (both 'flat' and 'floor' correspond to Spanish *piso*). Here, a non-standard prop (something like *¿planta?*, a synonym for *piso* meaning 'floor') could help students to understand their mistake.

Conclusions

We believe that the most appropriate form of written corrective feedback should vary from one problem to another, the teacher adjusting it to the student's knowledge about the item. Although students have their individual and group preferences concerning the type of feedback expected from their teacher, mostly based on their previous learning experience, they would

certainly value the fact that the feedback they receive is tailored to their personal learning needs. We suggest that teachers should try to provide the minimum feedback sufficient for the students to solve a problem, preferably on their own.

Reporting on teachers' beliefs concerning CF, Lee (2009) observes that, in theory, teachers *want* students to learn how to locate and correct errors. In practice, however, they continue doing it for them, or using error codes. Considering the limitations of teachers' time, space for written correction, and the traditional CF setting allowing for single feedback, we should agree that tailoring CF to students' personal learning needs is not easy. Providing Direct CF is often a solution for the teacher who wants the students to correct their mistake but is aware of the fact that the students would need scaffolding. As a traditional written CF setting allows only for single feedback, the teacher can just provide the student with one prop instead of a series of subsequent props that would be required. Another obstacle to feedback having the desired effect is the mark. Once a mark is given, students tend to become more passive and abandon any future effort (a fact that should encourage us teachers to think of other alternative methods of assessing students' work). If a mark is essential in students' assessments, it could be given after the students have a chance to correct their mistakes using external resources having already received feedback from the teacher (Kozlova 2007).

References

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The author

Inna Kozlova is a lecturer in English at the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). She has an English Philology degree from Tiumen State University, a BA in European Studies (University of Wolverhampton), and a PhD in Translation Theory (UAB). Her recent research focuses on the use of resources by translators and ESP learners. She is an author of various articles and a co-author of PACTE (Acquisition of Translation Competence and Assessment) research group publications in academic journals and volumes. Her teaching experience includes teaching English and Russian at various institutions, including monographic courses.

Email: Inna.Kozlova@uab.es