Teaching Tips

Error Correction: A Traffic Light Approach

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One of the more challenging and often frustrating tasks of the second language teacher is deciding when and how errors should be corrected. Controversy in the field of second language acquisition continues to focus on error correction (Guenette, 2007; Karra, 2006; Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2005). Studies in error detection and correction are far-ranging and in some cases, even contradictory. They focus on such themes as feedback modes and methodologies (O'Reilly, Flaitz, and Kromrey, 2001), models for corrective discourse (Panova and Lyster, 2002), use of computer assisted language learning systems (Heift, 2003; Tschichold, 2003), self (student) versus teacher detection and correction (Renou, 2000; Camps, 2003), and specificity versus generality of feedback (Ferris and Roberts, 2001). The research is complex. However, as second language teachers, we know intuitively that the process of error correction and detection must be kept simple and safe for the learner.

Valuing the Learner

We begin with several primary tenets of successfully working with learners in general and with second language learners specifically. Viewing them as resources and models to other learners are strategies consistent with sound learning principles (Gray and Fleischman, 2005; Zehler, 1994). Creating a safe and supportive learning environment is paramount for those students who may lack confidence, fear making mistakes, and are generally weak learners (Bandura, 1997). This further assumes that feedback should be done with compassion and empathy (Fink, 2003).

Given empathic feedback, there is another important question that is critical to re-examining the arena of error detection and feedback. What role does choice play in error correction? When given a choice as to a set of strategies for learning new content, results show an increased level of performance in the use of the second language (Bishop, 2006; Schwartz, 2004). If choice plays such an important role in learning, then how could it be incorporated as a strategy in error correction? What might be the results if a student were to choose how he/she wishes feedback on errors?

Think "Traffic Light"

One technique that we have used in the EFL classroom is called the "Traffic Light." We have modified this technique from a strategy gleaned from Vohra (2006). The "traffic light" technique has two steps:

Step 1, The Awareness Talk: Error Detection and Correction

The first thing we did was to have a talk with our students about the importance of error correction in their language learning process. We did not just mention our reasons or opinions regarding this process but we tried to encourage them to think about the positive effects error correction can have in their second language.

Step 2, The Traffic Light: Red, Yellow, and Green

The second step is to explain the use of the traffic light and the meaning behind the three colors: red, yellow, green. Each student is given three squares: one red, one yellow, and one green. When they volunteer or are asked to speak in class, they will flash one of the following three cards:

Red: When a student flashes a red card, the student does not want to be corrected at all. Some students find it frustrating to be corrected when they are trying to communicate. By showing their red card, they are telling us that they do not feel like being corrected at this time.

Yellow: By showing a square card, students want the teacher to correct their major mistakes. These types of students want to communicate freely without being stopped every time they make a minor mistake (e.g., using a male article with a female noun in Spanish).

Green: A green card indicates that the student wishes to be corrected at the very time of the error. Corrective feedback is requested for both minor and major errors.

Observations: Drive Carefully When Approaching Traffic Lights

Initially, many students flashed the red cards, indicating that they were somewhat uncomfortable with being corrected. Many other learners displayed yellow cards. The yellow cards indicated an increased level of confidence in their learning and the acceptance of more feedback. Another significant behavior began to evolve. Students learned from other students' mistakes, and teacher and fellow student corrective feedback allowed additional learning and modeling for others.

Gradually, we began to notice a pattern in the majority of students. They increased the amount they used their second language and flashed green cards most often. They now were seeking clear and honest feedback and correction of their errors. Students explained that when they showed their red cards, they wanted to focus on speaking in the classroom and not worry about their errors at that time. Once

they generated the language more freely, they sought more error correction, flashing the yellow cards. Students gradually moved to the point of wanting error correction. They consistently showed the green card, indicating the value they placed on the importance of immediate feedback when they made errors.

Since adopting this strategy in the classroom, we have seen students taking increased responsibility for their own learning and for their own error corrections. They pay attention to feedback more readily, especially when they can choose how feedback is to be given to them. Letting them make choices and use cues with the flashed cards have increased their confidence and participation in class. Most amazingly, there is a substantial reduction in their reluctance to speak, leading to an increased level of speaking in their second language. They speak with greater levels of confidence, their meaning is more clearly conveyed, and their common errors are fewer. Students are much more eager to speak. The 'traffic light" strategy has definitely changed the dynamics of the classroom and has become an effective technique in the correction of errors.

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What makes a trip an adventure?

Maya Moore, ELS Language Services

It's the end of the day. You have a class of 15-18 predominantly male students in their mid to late 20's. They are sleepy, their eyelids threatening to close at the slightest provocation, and a bit irritable. They are also college bound, which means they want an engaging class, but they don't want to feel they are wasting their time. What kind of course should you create?

A few years ago I made the mistake of putting together a heavily academic journalism class and found my students on the verge of mutiny. This time I chose the theme of "adventure," dividing the topic into three modules: adventure sports, adventure travel, and adventurous people. We began by carving out a general definition of the word adventure, then followed with a combination of structured conversation, interviews of native speakers, team presenta-