CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.

Direct or Indirect Feedback in Written Correction

Sandra Lee McKay
Professor Emeritus
San Francisco State University

One of the ongoing debates in correcting students' essays is whether or not teachers should give students direct or indirect feedback on their errors. Indirect feedback means that the teacher provides students with some indication that an error exists in their writing. This could involve the teacher underlining or circling errors or putting an error code over the error. For example, if a student wrote *Yesterday I goed to the store,* the teacher would cross out *goed* and write VT above it.

An error coding system could be something like the following. To be most effective, the symbol system should be worked out by the teacher, based on students' proficiency level and explained to the students.

- Verb tense - VT
- Subject verb agreement - SV
- Word form - WF
- Wrong word - WW
- Articles - ART
- Sentence fragment - FRAG
- Word Order - WO
- Insert Word - ^
- Spelling - SP

A second strategy for error correction is direct feedback. In this case, if a student wrote *Yesterday I goed to the store*, the teacher would cross out *goed* and write the word *went* over it.

Often teachers assume that indirect feedback is what should always be used since it requires the students to monitor their own errors and to try to fix the error on their own. Hence, such a strategy promotes learner autonomy. There are indeed many reasons for using indirect feedback on students' essays but it is important to recognize that there are many reasons why a student makes an error, from carelessness to overgeneralizing. Typically teachers need to suit the feedback to the type of error and the students' level of proficiency and diligence.

Let us look at some examples of errors that might warrant direct rather than indirect feedback. If in a grammar class, the teacher has not yet introduced the irregular past tense, then the fact a student wrote *Yesterday I goed to the store* suggests that the student has learned the rule for the regular past tense formation and has applied the rule. In such an instance the student doesn't know *go* is irregular so it would be best to provide the student with direct feedback (i.e., writing *went* over the verb) and telling the student that this verb is irregular.

Another time when direct feedback might be warranted is when a student writes a sentence using a verb that is not usually used in that particular context. For example, a student might write *Recently bank interest rates expanded by two percent.* While the meaning of the sentence is clear, a discussion of interest rates and numbers typically uses the verb *increase* rather than *expand.* In this case, the student has likely consulted a dictionary or thesaurus and used a word that is a synonym for *increase.* The meaning of *expand* is similar but it is typically used with volume or mass. Asking students to self-correct such a sentence would be very challenging for students if they were not familiar with the difference between *increase* and *expand.* In many instances error correction for word choice is best handled through direct correction.

It is also important to recognize that different students may need different kinds of feedback. For a student who is having difficulty acquiring the basic grammatical rules of English, it may be better to let errors like *Recently bank interest rates expanded by two percent* go uncorrected if the essay has many more basic errors regarding verb tense and subject-verb agreement. On the other hand, students who are progressing very nicely in English grammar may want every error indicated and be able to self-correct the majority of their errors, though perhaps not all word choice errors.

The main point is that different errors and different students may warrant different error correction strategies. While this may involve more reflection on the part of the teacher when correcting students' essays, it will likely result in more productive error correction in which the feedback suits the circumstances. In short, every student is unique with special needs and the more written feedback can be suited to the student and the error, the more likely it will lead to greater writing proficiency for the student.

Contributor: Dr. Sandra McKay, Professor Emeritus, San Francisco State University
Jai-Ho Yoo, CAPE President

For more information, please visit our website at www.cape.edu.