CAMBRIDGE TEACHER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Series Editors: Marion Williams and Tony Wright

This series is designed for all those involved in language teacher training and development: teachers in training, trainers, directors of studies, advisers, teachers of in-service courses and seminars. Its aim is to provide a comprehensive, organised and authoritative resource for language teacher training and development.

Teach English – A training course for teachers
by Adrian Doff

Training Foreign Language Teachers – A reflective approach
by Michael J. Wallace

Literature and Language Teaching – A guide for teachers and trainers*
by Gillian Lazar

Classroom Observation Tasks – A resource book for language teachers and trainers*
by Ruth Wajnryb

Tasks for Language Teachers – A resource book for training and development*
by Martin Parrott

English for the Teacher – A language development course*
by Mary Spratt

Teaching Children English – A training course for teachers of English to children*
by David Vale with Anne Feunteun

A Course in Language Teaching – Practice and theory
by Penny Ur

Looking at Language Classrooms – A teacher development video package

About Language – Tasks for teachers of English
by Scott Thornbury

Action Research for Language Teachers
by Michael J. Wallace

Mentor Courses – A resource book for trainer-trainers
by Angi Malderez and Caroline Bodoczky

Alive to Language – Perspectives on language awareness for English language teachers
by Valerie Arndt, Paul Harvey and John Nuttall

Teachers in Action – Tasks for in-service language teacher education and development
by Peter James

Advising and Supporting Teachers
by Mick Randall with Barbara Thornton

* Original Series Editors: Ruth Gairns and Marion Williams

A Course in Language Teaching

Practice and Theory

Penny Ur

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

▶ Unit Five: Giving feedback on writing

This unit describes various problems associated with the giving of feedback on original writing in the foreign language, and gives some advice as to how to deal with them. This advice is to be related to critically, as suggested in the Discussion task below.

Task **Critical discussion**

After reading each section think or discuss: how far do you agree with the advice? Would you (or do you) use the recommended feedback strategies?

1. What should feedback be mainly on: language? Content? Organization?

The problem
When a student submits a piece of original writing, the most important thing about it is, arguably, its content: whether the ideas or events that were written about were significant and interesting. Then there is the organization and presentation: whether the ideas were arranged in a way that was easy to follow and pleasing to read. Finally, there is the question of language forms: whether the grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation were of an acceptable standard of accuracy.

Many teachers are aware that content and organization are important, but find themselves relating mainly to language forms in their feedback, conveying the implicit message that these are what matters. This is for various reasons:

1. Mistakes in spelling or grammar catch the eye and seem to demand to be corrected; they are very difficult to ignore.
2. Students also want their language mistakes to be corrected. (Ask them! And see Leki, 1991.)
3. Language mistakes are far more easily and quickly diagnosed and corrected than ones of content and organization.

Advice
We should, I think, correct language mistakes; our problem is how to do so without conveying the message that these are the only, or main, basis for evaluation of a piece of writing. One possibility is to note corrections within the body of the text, and devote comments at the end to matters of content and organization, followed by the evaluation. Alternatively, we may correct mistakes and make suggestions as to content and organization, but not evaluate; and give the evaluation only on the basis of the rewritten, polished version.

2. Should all mistakes be corrected?

The problem
If we accept that language (including punctuation) should be corrected, another problem arises: should *all* language mistakes be noted, even if there are so many

that the page will be covered with corrections? If not, how do we judge which to relate to and which not?

Advice
The problem is one of potential conflict between two of our functions as teachers: language instruction versus support and encouragement of learning. The correcting of mistakes is part of the language instruction, but too much of it can be discouraging and demoralizing. Also, over-emphasis on language mistakes can distract both learners' and teachers' attention from the equally important aspects of content and organization.

Some kind of compromise is obviously called for, which will vary according to context. In principle, it would seem reasonable to say that language mistakes should be ignored if there is a danger that to correct them would hinder learning more than help it. We might correct only mistakes that actually affect meaning (that is, might lead to misunderstanding or confusion on the part of the reader), and/or those which are very basic; or, of course, vary our response according to individual need.

3. Should learners rewrite, incorporating corrections?

The problem
When we receive written work, we normally correct and comment on it and give it back. The question is whether to insist on the students rewriting the compositions, incorporating our suggestions for improvements. This can be tedious, and students do not like doing it; on the other hand, it does probably help to reinforce learning of the correct forms.

Advice
I think rewriting is very important: not only because it reinforces learning, but also because rewriting is an integral part of the writing process as a whole. However, if we demand rewriting on the part of the students, they have a right to demand from us that we reread – and value – what they have done. It makes sense to see the first version as provisional, and to regard the rewritten, final version as 'the' assignment, the one that is submitted for formal assessment. This helps to motivate learners to rewrite and to appreciate the value of doing so.

4. Should we let students correct or give feedback on each other's written work?

The problem
Correcting written work is very time-consuming, particularly if we have large classes. One possible solution is to let students correct and edit each other's writing. They may not be able to see or define all the good qualities or shortcomings of an assignment, but they will detect at least some of them. The problem is: will students feel uncomfortable correcting, or being corrected by, their peers? Will they accept criticism (positive or negative) from each other?

Advice
In general, yes, peer-correction can be a time-saving and useful technique; also, critical reading for style, content and language accuracy is a valuable exercise in itself. This does not release us from the duty of checking and evaluating student writing; but it can be a substitute for first-draft reading. Students can work together on their first drafts, giving each other feedback on content, language and organization; they then rewrite and give in the final version to the teacher.

The question of personal relationships, trust and willingness to accept criticism and help from one another remains. This is not a problem that can be solved by particular teaching techniques; it depends on the general classroom climate, which in its turn is created by the attitudes of both students and teachers.

Notes

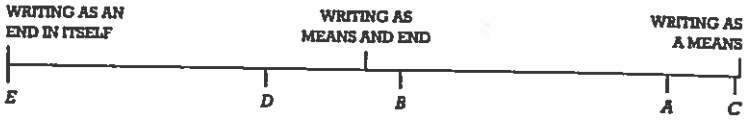
(1) Differences between written and spoken discourse

The essential difference is, strictly speaking, between formal, detached discourse and informal, interactive discourse: usually, it is true, the first is writing and the second speech, but not always. For example, passing notes between participants during a meeting or lecture is writing but displays many of the characteristics of informal speech as described in this unit; and the reading of a paper at a conference, a news broadcast, a poetry recitation, are instances of speech with many of the characteristics of formal writing. This has led some writers to prefer to distinguish between 'autonomous' (usually corresponding to formal written) versus 'non-autonomous' (usually corresponding to informal spoken) prose (see Tannen, 1982). In rare cases we may even find mixed genres in either writing or speech: informal, non-interactive (a comic monologue), or formal, interactive (a Shakespeare play). However, in the vast majority of cases the differences are, as suggested in this unit, applicable to writing as opposed to speech and as such, I think, provide helpful terms of reference for teaching.

(2) Should students be aware of the differences?

More advanced, adult students – particularly those who are studying the language for academic or business purposes and may need to do extensive writing themselves – may well benefit from a formal presentation of such information. Other learners may simply be made aware of differences at the level of individual language item: that colloquial expressions, such as *cop* or *glitzy*, are not usually used in writing; that contractions such as *don't* and *he's* are usually written out in full, and so on.

(3) Suggested solution to 'Classifying writing exercises' task



(A) is essentially reading comprehension; it provides little practice in writing beyond the copying. (B) is a vocabulary exercise which also requires brief creative writing. (C) is a grammar exercise (transformation of present tenses into pasts), contextualized into a story. (D) involves a combination of reading and writing. (E) is clearly a writing activity.

(4) Writing: My own composition process

Preparation
I think for a while, make very brief notes on a slip of paper in no particular order, and then launch straight into the writing, ordering and organizing as I go.

Process
I get nowhere without deleting or changing; do so constantly, as I write, and then again during subsequent rereadings. I frequently leave an unsatisfactory section and come back to it later; deliberately write later sections before earlier ones; change the order of sections. I edit both form and content throughout the writing process, including spelling, punctuation and typing errors, though the final editing sessions usually concentrate on 'micro'-aspects: changing words, letters and punctuation marks rather than whole sections.

I find writing absorbing and satisfying; often I get more satisfaction from rewriting and polishing than from the initial composition. Comments and suggestions from critical, knowledgeable readers during rewriting are sometimes painful at first, but eventually very helpful, in some cases essential.

Product
The final result is often quite different from the original conception, but usually I feel pride in it, and want people to read it. I like reading what others have written on the same topic, and am interested in hearing their reactions to my writing.

Further reading

BACKGROUND

Freedman, A., Pringle, I. and Yalden, J. (eds.) (1983) *Learning to Write: First Language/Second Language*, London: Longman.
(A series of articles on various aspects of learning to write: accounts of research, discussions of problems)

Hedge, T. (1988) *Writing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
(A summary of some main issues, followed by discussion of the teaching of various types and levels of writing, with plenty of illustrative tasks)

Kroll, B. (ed.) (1990) *Second Language Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
(A collection of research-based articles: relates mainly to writing done by fairly advanced adult learners)
Leki, I. (1991) 'Teaching second language writing; where we seem to be', *English Teaching Forum*, 29, 2, 8–11, 26.
(A brief, readable overview of issues in the teaching of writing)
Smith, F. (1982) *Writing and the Writer*, London: Heinemann.
(On the process of (first-language) writing in general; informal, readable)
Tannen, D. (1982) 'Oral and literate strategies in spoken and written narrative', *Language* 58, 1, 1–21.
(On the differences between 'autonomous' and 'non-autonomous' text, as distinct from the written/spoken dichotomy)

TEACHER'S HANDBOOKS

Byrne, D. (1988) *Teaching Writing Skills* (2nd edn.), London: Longman.
(A guide to teaching writing from early to advanced stages; plenty of practical teaching ideas)
Raimes, A. (1983) *Techniques in Teaching Writing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
(A simple exposition of a number of varied techniques, mainly focusses on production of acceptable written language forms)
White, R. V. (1980) *Teaching Written English*, London: Heinemann Educational Books.
(A readable, not too long introduction to the basics of the topic)
White, R. V. and Arndt, V. (1992) *Process Writing*, London: Longman.
(Discusses various strategies and techniques used during the writing process, and suggests appropriate teaching procedures)

ule 17: Giving feedback

► Unit One: Different approaches to the nature and function of feedback

Preliminary definition: What is feedback?

In the context of teaching in general, feedback is information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance. Some examples in language teaching: the words 'Yes, right!', said to a learner who has answered a question; a grade of 70% on an exam; a raised eyebrow in response to a mistake in grammar; comments written in the margin of an essay.

Feedback has two main distinguishable components: assessment and correction. In assessment, the learner is simply informed how well or badly he or she has performed. A percentage grade on an exam would be one example; or the response 'No' to an attempted answer to a question in class; or a comment such as 'Fair' at the end of a written assignment. In correction, some specific information is provided on aspects of the learner's performance: through explanation, or provision of better or other alternatives, or through elicitation of these from the learner. Note that in principle correction can and should include information on what the learner did right, as well as wrong, and why! – but teachers and learners generally understand the term as referring to the correction of mistakes, so that is (usually) how it is used here.

stion **Are the two components of assessment and correction completely separable? In other words, can you have assessment without correction, or correction without assessment?**

Read on for a possible answer to this.

The relationship between assessment and correction

It is, of course, perfectly possible to give assessment without correcting, as when a final percentage mark on an exam is made known to a learner without the exam itself being returned or commented on. The other way round is very much less feasible: it is virtually impossible to comment on what is right or wrong in what a learner has done without conveying some kind of assessment. If a correction is supplied, the learner is very aware that this means the teacher thinks something was wrong; if comment is given on why something was appropriate, there is necessarily an underlying message of commendation.

Teachers are sometimes urged to be 'non-judgemental' when giving feedback; in my opinion this is unrealistic. Any meaningful feedback is going to involve

some kind of judgement. It is more useful, perhaps, to accept that there is judgement involved, but to try to make the attitude to this more positive: that mistakes are a natural and useful part of language learning; that when the teacher gives feedback on them, the purpose is to help and promote learning; and that 'getting it wrong' is not 'bad', but rather a way into 'getting it right'.

Approaches to the giving of feedback

In Boxes 17.1 and 17.2 you will find expressions of selected opinions on the nature and functions of assessment and mistake correction; these are based on different theories of language learning or methodologies. It is not essential for you to be familiar with the names or details of the theories for the purposes of this bit of study; but if you are interested in reading further on any of them, see McLaughlin (1987) and/or Richards and Rodgers (1986); or references provided with specific items.

The opinions as stated here are obviously simplified, and expressed in 'strong' forms, as these are likely to provide more interesting and fruitful departure-points for discussion.

BOX 17.1: THE PROVISION OF ASSESSMENT: DIFFERENT OPINIONS

Audio-lingualism
Negative assessment is to be avoided as far as possible since it functions as 'punishment' and may inhibit or discourage learning. Positive assessment provides reinforcement of correct responses, and promotes learning.

Humanistic methodologies
A crucial function of the giving of assessment is to preserve and promote a positive self-image of the learner as a person and language learner. Assessment therefore should be positive or non-judgemental.

Skill theory
For successful acquisition of a skill, the learner needs feedback on how well he or she is doing; hence the importance of the provision of constant and honest assessment (Johnson, 1995).

Task ***Stage 1: Study***

As you read, think about or discuss how far you agree with the various statements.

Stage 2: Discussion

After reading: can you summarize your own opinion on the functions of assessment and correction? Write down your own statements in a format similar to that shown in Boxes 17.1/2; if you are working in a group, compare your ideas with those of colleagues.

If you are interested in comparing your own opinion with mine, look at the Notes, (1).

BOX 17.2: THE CORRECTION OF MISTAKES: DIFFERENT OPINIONS

Audio-lingualism
Learner mistakes are, in principle, avoided by the limiting of progress to very small, controlled steps: hence there should be little need for correction. The latter is, in any case, not useful for learning; people learn by getting things right in the first place and having their performance reinforced.

Cognitive code-learning
Mistakes are regrettable, but an unavoidable part of learning: they should be corrected whenever they occur to prevent them occurring again.

Interlanguage

Mistakes are not regrettable, but an integral and important part of language learning; correcting them is a way of bringing the learner's 'interlanguage' closer to the target language (Selinker, 1972, 1992).

Communicative approach
Not all mistakes need to be corrected: the main aim of language learning is to receive and convey meaningful messages, and correction should be focussed on mistakes that interfere with this aim, not on inaccuracies of usage.

Monitor theory
Correction does not contribute to real acquisition of the language, but only to the learner's conscious 'monitoring' of speech or writing. Hence the main activity of the teacher should be to provide comprehensible input from which the learner can acquire language, not to correct (Krashen, 1982).

▷ Unit Two: Assessment

Note: In literature on education, a distinction is sometimes made between assessment (of learner performance), evaluation (of innovation or change in, for example, school organization or a course syllabus) and appraisal (of teacher performance). This unit is concerned only with feedback on learning, and the terms 'evaluation' and 'assessment' are used interchangeably.

Most of the feedback we give our learners is ongoing correction and assessment, directed at specific bits of learner-produced language with the aim of bringing about improvement; the type of evaluation involved here is sometimes called 'formative', since its main purpose is to 'form': to enhance, not conclude, a process. Distinct from this is the evaluation usually termed 'summative', where the teacher evaluates an overall aspect of the learner's knowledge in order to summarize the situation: how proficient he or she is at a certain point in time, for example, or how much he or she has progressed during a particular course.

Summative evaluation may contribute little or nothing to the ongoing teaching/learning process; but it is a part of the teacher's job, something we need to know how to do effectively.

Below are descriptions of various ways of gathering the information which will serve as a basis for assessment, and of some common criteria used for assessing it.

Gathering information (1): Tests

The most common way of gathering information for assessment is through tests (see Module 3); the usual criterion is an arbitrary level which the learner is expected to have reached; and the result is generally expressed through percentages.

Question **Can you remember taking an exam or test at the end of a programme of study, or in order to be accepted into a course or profession? What was the criterion for success, and how was your result expressed?**

Gathering information (2): Other sources

There, are, however, various problems with tests as a basis for summative evaluation: they are a one-off event which may not necessarily give a fair sample of the learner's overall proficiency; they are not always valid (actually testing what they say they are) or reliable (giving consistent results); and if they are seen as the sole basis for a crucial evaluation in the learner's career, they can be extremely stressful.

Other options do, however, exist. These are summarized below; or see Brindley (1989) for a more detailed discussion.

1. **Teacher's assessment.** The teacher gives a subjective estimate of the learner's overall performance.
2. **Continuous assessment.** The final grade is some kind of combination of the grades the learner received for various assignments during the course.
3. **Self-assessment.** The learners themselves evaluate their own performance, using clear criteria and weighting systems agreed on beforehand.
4. **Portfolio.** The learner gathers a collection of assignments and projects done over a long period into a file; and this portfolio provides the basis for evaluation.

Question **Have you yourself any experience of any of the above, as teacher or learner? How valid or useful were/are they, in your experience?**

Criteria

Having collected the 'evidence' of the learners' proficiency in one or more of the ways described above, what will be our yardstick in deciding how good it is? The following are some of the possibilities.

1. **Criterion-referenced:** how well the learner is performing relative to a fixed criterion, where this is based on an estimation of what it is reasonable or

desirable to demand from learners at the relevant point in their development (age, career, level, stage of a course).
2. Norm-referenced: how well the learner is performing relative to the group. In this case, a group of slow learners would be assessed according to different, easier, norms than a group of faster ones.
3. Individual-referenced: how well the learner is performing relative to his or her own previous performance, or relative to an estimate of his or her individual ability.

Question **What criteria do/would you yourself use in assessing learners' performance? Would you combine different criteria? Would you take into account learners' effort, motivation and progress in deciding on a final grade?**

Assessment grades

Percentages are probably the most common way of expressing assessment grades, but there are others.

1. Letters, words or phrases: 'A' or 'B'; 'Good', 'Excellent'. These look a little less impersonal, less definitive than percentages; but in fact learners often 'read' them as definitive number-type grades, exactly as they read percentages.
2. Profiles: a totally different kind of expression of assessment, comprising a number of separate grades on different skills or sections of knowledge, so that there is a possibility of describing the performance of an individual learner in more detail, showing his or her various strengths and weaknesses.

Summary question **What is the most common way of gathering information, assessing proficiency and awarding grades in your own teaching context? What changes or improvements would you like to see introduced?**

▶ Unit Three: Correcting mistakes in oral work

Preliminary note. On the whole, we give feedback on oral work through speech, on written work through writing; and although there are occasional situations where we might do it the other way round (for example, discuss an essay with a student in a one-to-one tutorial, or write a letter providing feedback on speech) these are very much the exceptions and will not be dealt with in this unit and the next.

There are some situations where we might prefer not to correct a learner's mistake: in fluency work, for example, when the learner is in mid-speech, and to correct would disturb and discourage more than help. But there are other situations when correction is likely to be helpful.

Question **Would you support the recommendation to refrain from correcting during fluency-oriented speech, and to do so only during accuracy-oriented exercises? Can you add any further comment?**
Read on for my answer to this.

The recommendation not to correct a learner during fluent speech is in principle a valid one, but perhaps an over-simplification. There can be places where to refrain from providing an acceptable form where the speaker is obviously uneasy or 'floundering' can actually be demoralizing, and gentle, supportive intervention can help. Conversely, even where the emphasis is on getting the language right, we may not always correct: in a grammar exercise, for example, if the learner has contributed an interesting or personal piece of information that does not happen to use the target form; also, when they have got most of an item right we may prefer not to draw attention to a relatively trivial mistake.

Techniques of oral correction

Oral corrections are usually provided directly by the teacher; but they may also be elicited from the learner who made the mistake in the first place, or by another member of the class. Corrections may or may not include a clarification of why the mistake was made, and may or may not require re-production of the acceptable form by the learner.

The objective of the inquiry project suggested below is to ascertain which of these techniques are in fact most used in a selection of lessons taught locally, and which are preferred by learners. Some practical conclusions may be drawn from the results.

Inquiry **Correction techniques in the classroom**

Stage 1: Preparation

Look at the set of oral correction techniques listed in Box 17.3. Reword, or add further items as you feel necessary. Think about and note down for yourself: which do you expect to be used most frequently in the classroom, and which do you imagine most learners actually prefer?
Make copies of the list for use at Stages 2 and 3.

Stage 2: Observation

Observe some lessons, taught, if possible, by different teachers; or watch video recordings of lessons. Every time you hear a correction, try to identify to which category it belongs and put a tick in the appropriate box. At the end, count your ticks, and note down which kinds of correction are most often used and which least.

Stage 3: Interview

Interview some learners to find out which kinds of correction they find most useful. If you are working on your own try to find ten or so respondents; if you are working in a group, then each participant can interview one or two, pooling results later.

The same list of techniques as used for observation can function as a basis for the interviews. Plus or minus signs can be inserted in the appropriate boxes to show which your respondents preferred or disliked.

The learners should be interviewed one by one, but the interview may be held in various ways. You may simply show them a copy of the list, and ask them to identify which techniques they prefer; or read out the options and ask them to comment; or ask them a general question like: 'Do you like the teacher to correct your mistakes, and if so, how?' – interpreting their answers yourself in order to fill in answers. The interview may, of course, be conducted in the learners' mother tongue, if you feel this is appropriate.

Summarize the most, and least, popular techniques in the same way as you did at the end of Stage 2.

Stage 4: Summary and conclusions

Discuss or think about what you have found out. Some interesting questions to consider might be the following:

- Did your results differ from your expectations as recorded at Stage 1? If so, how?
- Did the teachers you observed actually correct in the way learners say they prefer? If not, how would you account for the differences?
- As a general conclusion, which would seem to be the most helpful way(s) of correcting? And under what circumstances might you do something different?

Comments

One of the crucial issues which will emerge in this discussion is the discrepancy between what teachers think is best, or usually do, and what learners find most useful. Given that there is a discrepancy, whose opinion should be more respected? The learner has reliable intuitive knowledge about what kind of correction helps most; but teachers – especially experienced ones – have a different kind of knowledge which may be no less valid. My own feeling is that learner preferences are on the whole a reliable guide; and if I choose to disregard these I should be very clear in my mind why I am doing so.

How the correction is expressed

At least as important as what the correction consists of is how it is expressed: gently or assertively, supportively or as a condemnation, tactfully or rudely. On the whole, of course, we should go for encouraging, tactful correction; but it is less easy to generalize about gently/assertively: some learner populations respond better to the one, some to the other. In general, in fact, learner responses to different expressions of feedback are often surprising: a teacher correction that seems to an observer a humiliating 'put-down' may not be perceived as such by the learner to whom it was addressed; or an apparently gentle, tactful one may give offence. A good deal of teacher sensitivity is needed here.

BOX 17.3: ORAL CORRECTION TECHNIQUES

*Class observed .....

*Learner interviewed .....

Teacher's responses to mistakes	*Observation / Learner opinions*
1. Does not react at all.	
2. Indicates there is a mistake, but does not provide any further information about what is wrong.	
3. Says what was wrong and provides a model of the acceptable version.	
4. Indicates something was wrong, elicits acceptable version from the learner who made the mistake.	
5. Indicates something was wrong, elicits acceptable version from another member of the class.	
6. (May go with any of 3–5 above) Asks the learner who made the mistake to reproduce the corrected version.	
7. (May go with any of 3–5 above) Provides or elicits an explanation of why the mistake was made and how to avoid it.	

*Delete or fill in as appropriate.

Task **Observation and inquiry**

Pick out five or six instances of correction in a lesson, and for each note down briefly what happened and then add some adjectives you would use to describe the manner in which it was given (e.g. gentle/loud/hesitant/brisk/supportive?). If you were observing together with a colleague, compare your descriptions after the lesson: did your opinions tally? If not, is there any way of finding out whose perception was truer?

If feasible, find out from the learner(s) how they felt at the time, and compare their impressions with your own.

Unit Four: Written feedback

Learners' written work includes not only written compositions, but also assignments on grammar or vocabulary, answers to comprehension questions, tests and so on; and teachers are expected, as part of their job, to respond to such work, providing appropriate (written) feedback.

How can this feedback be made optimally effective?

Question **Can you remember how you felt about the ways teachers responded to your own written work when you were learning a foreign language (or even your own)? Try to recall particular instances, and perhaps share with colleagues.**

The following task invites you to experiment with correcting written work yourself; if you do not actually do it, you may find it interesting and helpful simply to look at the examples of learner writing in Box 17.4 and then read straight on to the *Comments* below.

ɔeriential task

Correcting written work

Stage 1: Reading

Look at the written assignments provided in Box 17.4. The first is a grammar exercise mainly on the present perfect tense, which the students did for homework. The second is a test on vocabulary, which is also intended to check their mastery of the use of relative clauses in definitions. The third is a short piece of writing done in class as an individual summary of a group discussion, and given in to the teacher at the end of the lesson.

Stage 2: Giving feedback

Imagine these are assignments done by your own students, and write in your corrections and other feedback either on the page itself or on a copy. Do this on your own rather than collaboratively.

Stage 3: Reflection

If you are in a group, come together with other participants when you have finished to compare your responses. Perhaps work in pairs, reading each other's corrections and discussing differences.

Whether working on your own or with others, you might find the set of questions shown in Box 17.5 useful to stimulate thinking. My own answers to these appear in the Notes, (2).

BOX 17.4: SAMPLES OF LEARNERS' WRITTEN WORK

1. Grammar exercise on the present perfect tense, given as homework

14.1 *You are asking someone about things he has done in his life. Use the words in brackets to make your questions.*

Example: (you ever / be / to Italy?) Have you ever been to Italy?

1 (you ever / be / to / South America?) Have you ever been to South America?
2 (you / read / any English books?) Have you ever read any English books?
3 (you / live / in this town all your life?) Have you ever ... in this town all your...
4 (how many times / you / be / in love?) how many times have you been in love?
5 (what's the most beautiful country you / ever / visit?) What's the most beautiful country have you ever visited?
6 (you ever / speak / to a famous person?) have you ever spoken to a famous...?

14.2 *Complete the answers to these questions. Use the verb in brackets.*

Example: Is it a beautiful painting? (see) Yes, it's the most beautiful painting I've ever seen.

1 Is it a good film? (see) Yes, it's the best film I'ev ever seen
2 Is it a long book? (read) Yes, it's the longer book I'ev ever read
3 Is she an interesting person? (meet) Yes, she's the most interested gril I have ever met.

(From Raymond Murphy, *English Grammar in Use*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 29)

2. Test on vocabulary and relative clauses

Define the following words, using who/which/that/whose/when/where.

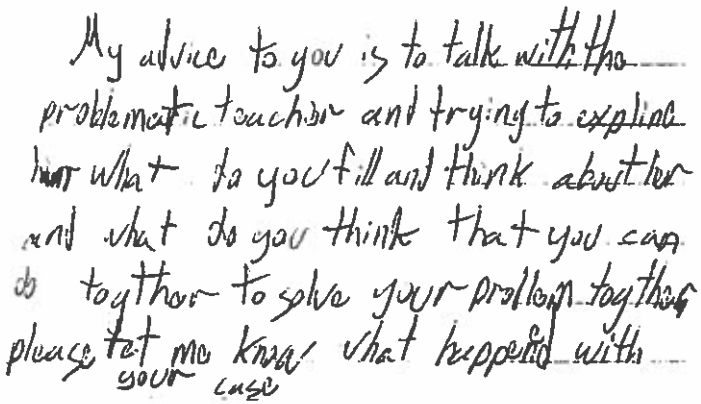
For example: a deserted house = a house where nobody lives

1. a temple: a house where religious people lives in.
2. a motionless tree: a tree which not moving at all.
3. an illusion: a false sight.
4. courage: a man who not have any Fear.
5. sweat: its like terrible but more then this.
6. a PR man: a man who work on a public relations.
7. a virus: a thing which make people sick.
8. an antibody: a thing which help the man get over the sickness.
9. a host: a man who takes visitors to his house
10. a paw: a part of a animal.

Writing following a discussion

Dear Helpful Harriet,
I have a problem with this teacher at school. He is always shouting at me, though I don't disturb more than lots of other pupils in the class. It's true that I sometimes don't do my homework, but I know his subject very well, always get high marks on the tests, so there is no point doing silly homework. He gave me a much lower mark than I deserve at the end of the term. It's not fair. And it's no good saying go to the class teacher, she always backs him up. What can I do?

Yours,
FRUSTRATED STUDENT



ollow-up scussion

Conclusions

Can you draw some conclusions as to what makes feedback on learner writing more or less effective? Try writing down what for you would be the three most important principles in giving written feedback, and share with colleagues.

If you wish to explore this topic further, you might like to look at Module 11: *Teaching writing*, Unit Five; for the topic of feedback on more advanced writing, see Zamel (1985).

BOX 17.5: CONSIDERING WRITTEN FEEDBACK

1. Did you use a red pen for your comments? Or another colour? Or a pen or pencil? Can you account for your choice?
2. For which of the assignments, if any, did you give some kind of assessment at the end ('Good', for example)? Why, or why not?
3. Did you correct all the mistakes? If so, why? If not, on what did you base your decision which to correct and which not?
4. Those mistakes you corrected: did you write in the correct form? Give a hint what it should be? Simply indicate it was wrong? Why?
5. Did you note only what was wrong, or did you give some kind of indication of what was right or particularly good?
6. Did you provide any kind of informative feedback other than mistake correction and overall assessment, designed to help the student improve? (e.g. 'This was good because...', or 'Take care when you...')
7. When responding to the assignment that entailed expression of personal opinion, did you provide a response of your own to the content? ('I agree with this point', 'Yes, but have you considered...?')
8. Did you require the student to redo any of the assignment? Can you say why, or why not?
9. Finally, try rereading your corrections imagining you are the student: what do you think the student will feel about them?

▷ Unit Five: Clarifying personal attitudes

This unit asks you to define your own attitudes to various aspects of the topic of feedback; it focusses particularly on the feelings and relationships which may be affected by the giving and getting of feedback.

Task **Agree or disagree?**

In Box 17.6 there is a list of statements, with an 'Agree–Disagree' continuum below each. You may like to add more statements in the spaces provided.

Put a cross on the continuum for each statement to indicate how far you agree with it. Perhaps look first at the *Comments* section below, which may help (or complicate!) your thinking. My own opinions are expressed in the Notes, (3).

Comments on Box 17.6

1. In relating to this question try to free yourself from the superficial negative connotations often associated with the phrase 'power hierarchy'. Power hierarchies may in some circumstances be necessary, productive and fully compatible with good human relationships.
2. In answering this question, teachers often conveniently overlook the word 'potentially'! Note: the question is not whether assessment humiliates, but if

BOX 17.6: STATEMENTS ABOUT FEEDBACK

1. The fact that the teacher gives feedback on student performance implies a power hierarchy: the teacher above, the student below.
   Very much agree ⟷ *Totally disagree*
2. Assessment is potentially humiliating to the assessed person.
   Very much agree ⟷ *Totally disagree*
3. Teachers should give their students only positive feedback, in order to encourage, raise confidence and promote feelings of success; negative feedback demoralizes.
   Very much agree ⟷ *Totally disagree*
4. Giving plenty of praise and encouragement is important for the fostering of good teacher–student relationships.
   Very much agree ⟷ *Totally disagree*
5. Very frequent approval and praise lose their encouraging effect; and lack of praise may then be interpreted as negative feedback.
   Very much agree ⟷ *Totally disagree*
6. Teachers should not let students correct each other's work, as this is harmful to their relationships.
   Very much agree ⟷ *Totally disagree*
7. .....
   Very much agree ⟷ *Totally disagree*
8. .....
   Very much agree ⟷ *Totally disagree*

there is or is not such a potential. (And if so, what should or may be done about it?)

3. The main controversial feature in this statement is the word 'only' in the first line.
4. In considering this question it might help to ask yourself: can I conceive of (or recall) a good teacher–student relationship where the teacher gives or gave very little positive feedback? Can I conceive of (or recall) one where there is or was plenty of positive feedback but relationships are or were nevertheless bad?
5. Can you recall a situation where the teacher over-praised? Or is the opposite usually the case?
6. Again, your answer to this will very much depend on your own experience.

Notes

(1) The value of assessment and correction for learning

In general, both positive and negative assessments should, in my opinion, be made available to the learner, as honestly as possible: mainly because in my experience this is what learners feel, and say, they want. However, it is essential for such assessments to be given in an atmosphere of support and warm solidarity, so that learners feel that the teacher's motive is honestly to promote and encourage their learning, not to put them down. The problem in negative assessment is often not the assessment itself, but rather the accompanying implications of aggression on the side of the assessor and humiliation on the side of the assessed – which can, and should, be eliminated.

As to correction: I think there is certainly a place for correction. Again, most learners ask for it; and it does contribute to some extent to learning. However, we should not over-estimate this contribution; most experienced teachers are familiar with the phenomenon of recurring corrections of the same mistake which do not seem to lead to improvement. I would rather invest time and energy in creating opportunities for learners to get things right as much as possible than in painstaking work on correcting mistakes. This is one point on which I am in agreement with the presently unfashionable audio-lingual method.

(2) Comments on the questions in Box 17.5

1. I usually use a coloured pen for corrections, simply in order to make them maximally clear and visible to the learner. The exception to this is when providing feedback on advanced writing (essays, papers, other forms of self-expression); here, if the writer has printed or written in ink, I give comments in pencil in order to convey a less authoritative, more diffident message: I'm suggesting, not telling.
2. I provided an assessing comment on the grammar exercise, in order to let the student know how well I thought he or she had mastered the material. Similarly, I gave a grade on the test, partly because this is what people who do tests usually expect and want. For the third assignment, however, I did not: this is a piece of spontaneous composition where the main activity was discussion, the writer had little chance to reread or polish, and I did not think it fair to judge it as a sample of the learner's writing.
3. I corrected virtually all the mistakes in the test. In the grammar exercise I corrected all the mistakes which had to do with the target forms, but ignored most of the others: learners can only use just so much feedback information: to give too much may simply distract, discourage and actually detract from its value for learning. In the third assignment I did not mark in corrections in the body of the student's text, but noted below some points they might attend to for the future: this was because I see this kind of writing not, like the others, as a presentation of language samples for display, but mainly as a form of self-expression, to be respected as such.
4. I wrote in the full correct forms. I do not see much value in demanding that students focus again on the wrong form and try to work out what is wrong

about it – besides, many of them never bother to do so! I would rather confront them with the acceptable forms as quickly and clearly as possible. (However, in the case of a first draft of an essay which a student is to rewrite, I might simply indicate there is a mistake, knowing that they are going to take the trouble to find out how to correct in order to make the final draft as good as possible.)

5. Yes. I put in ticks here and there indicating my appreciation of a difficulty overcome, or a note such as 'well expressed' in the margin. These responses can draw learners' attention to their successes, thus boosting morale and reinforcing learning.
6. Yes. For example, I noted for the student who did the relative clause exercise that she needed to review the irregular third-person forms of the present tense. If we can give information that makes students aware of their particular problems and suggest what they might do about them, this is one of the most valuable kinds of feedback we can provide.
7. Again, yes. I think it is very important to respond to an expression of opinion with one of my own: 'Yes, I feel the same...', 'I'm not sure about this. What would happen if...?'. This kind of comment makes it clear that the message is important, and that I see it as valuable enough to respond to as interlocutor.
8. Asking learners to re-do all their corrected work as a routine can be tedious and discouraging. For these exercises I did not require rewriting, though I did give another very similar grammar exercise to the one shown here a week or two later, having reviewed what I saw as the main problems. One instance where I do consistently request rewriting is for longer compositions or essays. In this case, the first draft does not get graded, only corrected, with constructive suggestions for the second version. The student then knows that, if he or she incorporates all the corrections and suggestions, there is a very good chance of getting a high mark, and the procedure is immediately rewarding as well as learning-valuable.

(3) Statements about feedback

1. Feedback implies a power hierarchy.

In my opinion a power hierarchy in the classroom, with the teacher in charge and students subordinate, is inevitable: the right of the teacher to correct and assess is one expression of it. Underlying, and to some extent offsetting this apparent dominance, however, is the teacher's role as server and supporter of the learners: the two roles are not only compatible, but, I think, complementary and essential for healthy classroom relationships.

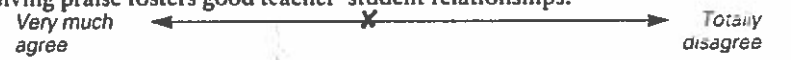
2. Assessment is potentially humiliating.

If you have recently undergone assessment yourself, you may recall the experience of real, or feared, humiliation. It is important to recognize that the potential exists in order to be able to ensure that it is not realized.

3. Teachers should give only positive feedback.

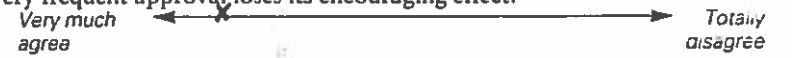
It is true that positive feedback tends to encourage, but this can be overstated, as here. Negative feedback, if given supportively and warmly, will be recognized as constructive, and will not necessarily discourage.

4. Giving praise fosters good teacher–student relationships.



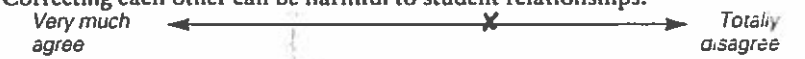
Yes, up to a point. But if there are good relationships, praise often becomes unnecessary; frank, friendly criticism is probably more appropriate and contributes more to the further strengthening of the relationship. And see the next question.

5. Very frequent approval loses its encouraging effect.



I have seen this happen: the giving of praise can easily be devalued through overuse. Students come to expect it as a matter of course, cease to be particularly encouraged by it, and are hurt if it is not forthcoming. In fact, overused, uncritical praise can begin to irritate.

6. Correcting each other can be harmful to student relationships.



If peer-correction causes conflict or tension between individuals, this probably means that relationships were not particularly warm or trusting in the first place. In other words, I do not think that peer-correction in itself can hurt if students feel good with one another in general; it may, however, do so if there was previous dislike or lack of trust between them.

Further reading

Bartram, M. and Walton, R. (1991) *Correction: Mistake Management – A Positive Approach for Language Teachers*, Hove: Language Teaching Publications.
(A compact, clear, systematic and, as it says, practical guide to the subject; interesting and relevant reader tasks help to clarify)

Brindley, G. (1989) *Assessing Achievement in the Learner-Centred Curriculum*, Macquarie University, Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.
(A comprehensive and readable overview of ways of assessment in language learning)

Edge, J. (1989) *Mistakes and Correction*, London: Longman.
(A simple, practical handbook: suggests various techniques for correcting in different situations)

Harmer, J. (1984) 'How to give your students feedback', *Practical English Teaching*, 5, 2, 39–40.
(Practical guidelines on ways of correcting in the classroom)

Johnson, K. (1988) 'Mistake correction', *ELT Journal*, 42, 2, 89–96.
(Ways of correcting mistakes effectively within a skill model of language learning)
Leki, I. (1991) 'The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes', *Foreign Language Annals* (New York), 24, 3, 203–18.
(An interesting piece of research, indicating that learners do, on the whole, want detailed correction of grammar, spelling, etc.)
Norrish, J. (1983) *Language Learners and their Errors*, London: Macmillan.
(A basic, sensible teacher's guide, clearly written, with plenty of practical examples and suggestions)
Raz, H. (1992) 'The crucial role of feedback and evaluation in language classes', *The Teacher Trainer*, 6, 1, 15–17.
(Stresses the importance for the learner of ongoing supportive feedback rather than test-based evaluation)
Zamel, V. (1985) 'Responding to student writing', *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 1, 79–101.
(A thoughtful discussion of dilemmas in giving feedback on (advanced) student writing, and some practical solutions)

REFERENCES IN UNIT ONE

Johnson, K. (1995) *Language Teaching and Skill Learning*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Krashen, S. D. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.
McLaughlin, B. (1987) *Theories of Second-Language Learning*, London: Edward Arnold.
Richards, J. C. and Rodgers, T. S. (1986) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Selinker, L. (1972) 'Interlanguage', *IRAL*, 10, 219–31.
Selinker, L. (1992) *Rediscovering Interlanguage*, London: Longman.