22 *TESL Reporter 34,1 (2001), pp. 22—34*

Form-focused Negative Feedback: Correcting Three Common Errors

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Introduction: To Correct or Not to Correct?

It is well-known that advocates and practitioners of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach tend to refrain from correcting learners' errors or using explicit grammar rules to explain and to help learners overcome erroneous structures or usages (Richards & Rogers, 1986). Indeed, error correction is seen as counter-productive on the grounds that it may impact negatively on the learner's motivation to use the target language.

Recent research in second language acquisition, however, has shown that form-focused instruction and explicit feedback on students' errors can assist or even accelerate the learning process (e.g., Carroll & Swain, 1993; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Granger & Tribble, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998; Zhou, 1992). The general approach adopted is called *consciousness raising* (CR), using form-focused negative feedback[1] to help learners notice and overcome persistent common errors by progressively approximating target language norms (Rutherford, 1998; Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1998).

In this paper, we would like to demonstrate how CR as an approach can be adopted to give collective error correction in class using three errors commonly found among Hong Kong Chinese ESL learners. The treatment of these three errors has been the focus of an empirical study, the complete details of which are being reported elsewhere (Chan & Li, to appear). The findings in the study show that the proposed model of remedial instruction is conducive to helping learners notice and overcome the erroneous structures. The correction procedure consists of algorithmically structured, cognitively manageable steps in the form of questions requiring (often) straightforward answers. As we will demonstrate below, the proposed model of remedial instruction is characterized by four design features: (a) pedagogically sound input to help learners notice the error and the correct model, (b) proceduralized steps supported by instructive examples, (c) explicit rules built into the steps to help learners conceptualize the error correction procedure involved, and (d) reinforcement exercises to consolidate the learner's grasp of the form and function of the correct model.

Collective Form-focused Negative Feedback: Correcting Three Common Errors

Three common errors among Hong Kong Chinese ESL learners were selected for experimentation. They are pseudo-tough movement (Yip, 1995; Li & Chan, 1999; e.g., *I am difficult to learn English), the misuse of the verb *concern* and the related confusion with the adjective *concerned* in the expression *be concerned about* (e.g., *your father concerns your future), and the misuse of the connective *on the contrary* to express a contrast between two different persons or things (e.g., *Hong Kong is now part of China; on the contrary, Taiwan is not). Below, we will go through the oral correction discussion of each of these three errors. To make explicit the rationale behind individual steps, the correction procedure will be structured in different phases. In each phase we will indicate what the teacher should or may do, followed by detailed instructions for learners as used in our own study. The errors or language examples, however, are for illustration only. As the context of language teaching and learning varies from place to place, readers who are considering replicating the instructional method should make the necessary adaptations to better suit the level and needs of their students.

Correcting "Pseudo-tough Movement" Errors

Phase One: Help Learners Notice the Error

Are the following sentences correct? Give a ✓ if you think so, and a ✘ if you don't think so.

(1) I am difficult to learn English.	
(2) Graduates are not easy to find a job.	
(3) Boys are easier to get their parents' permission to go camping.	
(4) You are impossible to stay here overnight.	
(5) They are inconvenient to go out now.	
(6) Hong Kong students are common to go to school late.	

Phase Two: Go Through the Error Correction Procedure Using Q-A

Can you identify and circle the adjectives in these sentences?

They are: _____

Let's look at sentence number (1):

I am difficult to learn English.

Can you work out **what** is difficult?

(a) _____ is difficult.

Now, can you work out **for whom XXX is difficult**?

(b) for _____

Okay, can you put (a) and (b) together and say what is difficult, and for whom?

(c) for _____ is difficult.

(c) is correct; can you identify the subject?

✓ <u>for me to learn English</u> is difficult

But English sentences with long subjects are not preferred. They are usually avoided. How can this be improved?

To improve (c), move the subject to the right, after the adjective, resulting in (d):

(for me to learn English) _____ is difficult ↓

(d) _____ is difficult for me to learn English

Then put the word "It" in the subject position, resulting in (e):

(e) It is difficult for me to learn English.

Phase Three: Consolidate Learners' Understanding by Repeating the Correction Procedure

Let's try to correct another sentence, say, number (5):

They are inconvenient to go out now.

Can you work out **what** is inconvenient?

(f) _____ is inconvenient.

Now, can you work out **for whom XXX is inconvenient**?

(g) for _____.

Okay, can you put (f) and (g) together and say what is inconvenient, and for whom?

(h) for _____ is inconvenient.

(h) is correct; can you identify the subject?

✓ <u>for them to go out now</u> is inconvenient.

But English sentences with long subjects are not preferred. They are usually avoided. How can this be improved?

To improve (h), move the subject to the right, after the adjective, resulting in (i):

(i) _____ is inconvenient for them to go out now.

Then put the word "It" in the subject position, resulting in (j):

(j) **It** is inconvenient for them to go out now.

Phase Four: Summarize the Correction Procedure

Now can you work out the correction of one more sentence, say, number (4)?

You are impossible to stay here overnight.

Step 1: what is ADJ?

Step 2: for whom?

Step 3: put Steps 1 and 2 together (what should the VERB be, "is" or "are"?)

Step 4: move the subject to the right, after the VERB and ADJ.

Step 5: put "It" at the beginning of the sentence.

Phase Five: Give Supplementary Information About the Error Where Appropriate

Notice that the usage problem "I am difficult to . . ." frequently occurs with the following adjectives:

easy, difficult, common, necessary, convenient, inconvenient, possible, probable, impossible, improbably, etc.

Phase Six: Consolidate Learners' Understanding Through Reinforcement Exercises

Phase Seven: Explain the Circumstances Under Which Sentences With a Similar Structure are Grammatical

After the learners have become reasonably familiar with the target structure, the teacher can deal with one residual problem: the structural pattern where "NP is Adj. to V" is grammatical.

Now look at the following sentences.

(7) Mary is difficult to convince.

(8) John is easy to please.

(9) This question is impossible to answer.

Are they correct? _____

Why are they correct? Although they look similar to the incorrect sentences (1) to (6) above, they are actually different in structure.

Sentences with verbs such as "convince," "please" and "answer," etc. require an **object** to complete them, i.e. *convince* ***somebody***, *please* ***somebody*** and *answer* ***something.***

What is the object of *convince* in (7)? _____

What is the subject of sentence (7)? _____

What is the object of *please* in (8)? _____

What is the subject of sentence (8)? _____

What is the object of *answer* in (9)? _____

What is the subject of sentence (9)? _____

What is the relationship between the **objects** of these verbs and the **subjects** of the sentences? _____

A useful rule of thumb is:

If **missing Object of Verb = Subject**

Then ✓ Subject + is (are) + ADJECTIVE + to + VERB

e.g., Mary is difficult to convince

This question is impossible to answer.

Now, can you determine whether the following sentences are correct or not?

(10) Mathematics is easy to learn. ☐

(11) John is easy to learn Mathematics. ☐

(12) John is easy to teach. ☐

(13) This lesson is hard to understand. ☐

(14) I am difficult to understand this lesson. ☐

Learners who have grasped the rule should have no problem pointing out that, unlike the rest, (11) and (14) are ungrammatical, and they should also be in a position to explain why.

Correcting the Misuse of the Verb *Concern*

Like "pseudo-tough movement," the misuse of the verb concern among Chinese ESL learners is partly the result of L1 interference. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that the word-for-word translation of the deviant sentence "*your father concerns your future" would result in a perfectly acceptable sentence in Chinese (pronounced in Cantonese):

你 爸 爸 擔 心 你 的 前 途

nei5 baa1 baa1 daam1 sam1 nei5 dik1 cin4 tou4

your father concern your future

If a similar structure is required in the learners' L1, it makes sense to alert them to this structural discrepancy by juxtaposing the correct L1 structure and the corresponding but incorrect L2 structure to help learners notice that the latter is deviant.

Phase One: Use Learners' L1 Knowledge to Elicit the Erroneous Structure

How do you express the following in English?

(1) 我 媽 媽 擔 心 我 的 考 試 成 績

ngo5 maa1 maa1 daam1 sam1 ngo5 dik1 haau2 si5 sing4 zik1

my mother conern my examination results

(My mother is concerned about my examination results.)

Phase Two: Draw Learners' Attention to Two Common Expressions For Signaling the Target Meaning

Two most common expressions we can use are:
CONCERN and BE CONCERNED ABOUT

Would you say any of the following?

(2) My mother concerns my examination results.

(3) My mother concerns about my examination results.

(4) My mother is concerned with my examination results.

Are they correct? _____

So how should we say (1) in English?

Phase Three: Introduce the Rule

Look at the sentence again and answer the following two questions:

(a) Somebody is worried about something. Who is worried?

_____

(b) What causes the worry?

_____

If X = **the person or persons feeling worried**

Y = **cause of the worry**

then X in sentence (1) is _____

Y in sentence (1) is _____

Phase Four: Summarize the Two Options and Illustrate Them With the Example Mentioned

To express the meaning of sentence (1) in English, we have two options:

Option One: Y CONCERN X

Option Two: X BE CONCERNED ABOUT Y

So we can say:

Option One: **My examination results CONCERN my mother.**

Option Two: **My mother IS CONCERNED ABOUT my examination results.**

Phase Five: Show a Few Other Contrastive Examples

Other examples are:

(5) His father's health **concerns** him.

(5a) He **is concerned about** his father's health.

(6) The fact that I lost my job **concerned** my mother.

(6a) My mother **was concerned about** the fact that I lost my job.

(7) What other people think of you **concerns** me.

(7a) **I am concerned about** what other people think of you.

Phase Six: Reiterate the Erroneous Pattern and Present the Two Rules of Thumb

What you should know is that the following pattern is ungrammatical:

(8) ✘ My mother *concerns* my examination results.

(9) ✘ My mother *concerns about* my examination results.

Summary: As a rule ...

I. Some**thing** CONCERNS some**one**

II. Some**one** IS CONCERNED ABOUT some**thing**

Phase Seven: Reinforcement Exercises

Correcting the Misuse of *On the Contrary*

Many advanced learners of English continue to have problems distinguishing between the correct usage of "on the contrary" and other functionally similar connectives such as "in contrast" and "by contrast." Very often, "on the contrary" is wrongly used to express a binary contrast, resulting in erroneous sentences such as "*Hong Kong is part of China. On the contrary, Taiwan is not." It is therefore useful to highlight the contrast between the correct usage of "on the contrary" and that of "in contrast" and "by contrast."

Phase One: Help Learners Notice the Error

Is sentence (1) correct? Why or why not?

(1) The computer system of that company is very advanced. **On the contrary,** ours is very backward.

Phase Two: Correct the Wrong Sentence by Using/Explaining the Proper Connective.

Sentence (1) is wrong. To correct it, the following connectives may be used:

Options:	**IN CONTRAST**
	BY CONTRAST
	BUT
	etc.

So we can say:

(2) ✓ The computer system of that company is very advanced. **In contrast,** ours is very backward.

(3) ✓ The computer system of that company is very advanced. **By contrast,** ours is very backward.

(4) ✓ The computer system of that company is very advanced, **but** ours is very backward.

Phase Three: Introduce the Correct Usage of "On the Contrary"

Then, when should we use the connective "on the contrary"?

Correct Usage

We use "on the contrary" when we have just said or implied that **something is not true**, and are going to say **that the opposite is true** *(Collins Cobuild dictionary)*.

For example,

(5) The assignment is not difficult. **On the contrary**, it is very easy.

(6) I don't think the marking scheme is lenient; **on the contrary**, it is very strict.

Phase Four: Help Learners Recognize the Correct Function of "On the Contrary"

To understand the correct function and usage of "on the contrary," learners should realize that the two clauses must be about the same subject, and that in both clauses

opposing qualities or views are asserted. This goal may be achieved by going through one or two sample sentences as follows:

> Let's try to analyze sentence (5) and see how the mechanism works. There is a clause before "on the contrary" (clause A) and another clause after "on the contrary" (clause B). Write down the two clauses in the space provided:
>
> **Clause A:** _____ **Clause B:** _____
>
> What is being talked about in both clauses **A** and **B**? _____
>
> Is the argument in clause **A** negative or positive? _____
>
> What about the argument in clause **B**, is it negative or positive? _____
>
> What is the relationship between the arguments in clauses **A** and **B**? _____
>
> Actually, the negative argument in **A** is similar to the positive argument in **B**.

A	↔	**B**
Negative		*Positive*
[assignment not difficult]		**[assignment very easy]**

> Now, let's analyze sentence (6) in the same way.
>
> (6) I don't think the marking scheme is lenient; on the contrary, it is very strict.
>
> In this sentence,
>
> **Clause A** is: _____ **Clause B** is: _____
>
> What is being talked about in both clauses **A** and **B**? _____
>
> Is the argument in clause **A** negative or positive? _____
>
> What about the argument in clause **B**, is it negative or positive? _____
>
> What is the relationship between the arguments in clauses **A** and **B**? Fill in the square brackets.

A	↔	**B**
Negative		*Positive*
[ ]		[ ]

Phase Five: Go Back to Wrong Sentence (1) and Ask Learners to Analyze It

> Now, let's look at sentence (1) again and see why the connective is wrong.
>
> (1) The computer system of that company is very advanced. On the contrary, ours is very backward.

In this sentence,

Clause A is: _____ **Clause B** is: _____

Do clauses **A** and **B** talk about the same thing/person? _____

What is being talked about in clause **A**? _____

What is being talked about in clause **B**? _____

Does the relationship that should exist in the use of

"on the contrary" hold? _____

Can we use "on the contrary" here? _____

Which connective is more appropriate? _____

Phase Six: Highlight the Correct Usage and Reiterate the Common Error

What you should know is that:

> "On the contrary" is **NOT** used to *compare things/people/ situations* and say that *they are different from each other.*

Now can you explain why the following sentences are ungrammatical?

(7) ✘ John is always late. **On the contrary**, Mary is always punctual.

(8) ✘ There are 40 students in this class; **on the contrary**, there are 35 students in that class.

(9) ✘ I have two brothers. **On the contrary**, Jane has four.

Phase Seven: Reinforcement Exercises

Conclusion: Key Factors Contributing to Effective Remedial Instruction

We hope to have demonstrated that, for a model of negative feedback or remedial instruction to be effective, the error in question must be shown to be "teachable" and "learnable" (Pienemann, 1984, 1985; Yip, 1995). Consider, for example, the remedial effort needed to correct a wrong complex sentence containing "although" and "but" such as *a*l*though he was hard-working, but he failed the exam*, and the remedial effort needed to make students understand why it is ungrammatical to say: **Tiger is dangerous animal.* While it takes no more than a few minutes to make the class realize the co-occurrence restriction of "although" and "but" in the same complex sentence, in the latter case it is not obvious how the teacher can help learners understand the anomalies and generate normative sentences involving the correct use of articles to express generic

reference (e.g., *A tiger is a dangerous animal; The tiger is a dangerous animal; or Tigers are dangerous animals*). All errors are therefore not equally correctible, and clearly some errors are easier to correct than others. The effectiveness of negative feedback depends on whether it is possible to break down the correction process into a sequence of cognitively manageable steps, in that the effort involved in between steps requires pedagogically minimal effort on the part of the learner. Here, two closely related research constructs "teachability" and "learnability" are relevant (Pienemann, 1984, 1985; Yip, 1995). To what extent the correction procedure of a given error type is teachable or learnable, is a research question that should be explored empirically, through a process of "trial and error" and progressively in successive stages of fine-tuning. This way, we believe, the content of the remedial instruction material thus developed is more likely to be robust and effective.

In terms of the design features of an effective model of negative feedback or remedial instruction, we think that it is best to have the proceduralized steps clearly formulated in a handout for students' reference, supported by instructive examples of typical errors, and supplemented by reinforcement exercises. In other words, the handout for learners should contain three functional parts: (a) the erroneous structure and the normative correct structure, (b) step-by-step detailed instructions leading to correction, using explicit rules where appropriate, and (c) reinforcement exercises to consolidate and deepen the learner's understanding of the error correction process. The rationale behind this pedagogical design is that, after going through the correction procedure, learners can use the handout as a self-learning aid that can be called upon to reactivate their memory of the steps, as when the learners want to use that structure in their own free writing.

Notes

1. Negative feedback refers to feedback which draws learners' attention to erroneous structures of the target language (Carroll and Swain, 1993).

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