

Effective and Appropriate Feedback for English Learners

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Effective Feedback

We receive feedback all the time. For example, when we are asked to repeat what was said or when people laugh at our joke, we know what to do next. In a school setting, this type of informal feedback occurs all the time. Students learn and adjust their behavior based on their experiences and the way others react. However, it is also expected that we, as teachers, provide more explicit feedback as part of instruction to guide and advance our students' learning. As teachers, we recognize the importance and value of substantive feedback to both the students and the teachers. For students, feedback points out what they have done well and what they should keep doing, as well as what they should adjust and work on next. Including both positive and negative or corrective feedback can motivate students and promote a growth mindset, which enables them to see errors as opportunities to learn, grow, and improve. Feedback is also valuable for teachers. It gives them an opportunity to analyze student growth in terms of objectives they are trying to meet. It informs teachers about the strengths in the student's work and the areas where more work is needed. As we try to be unbiased in our assessment and fair in our judgments as culturally responsive teachers, feedback enables us to clearly signal what we value in our students' thinking, background, and work. It allows space to prompt our students' thinking.

Ultimately, though, the real reason for effective feedback—the kind that is targeted, specific, and timely—is that it results in better learning for students. Improving student learning is our ultimate reason to implement effective feedback in the classroom.



Targeted

Effective feedback is targeted, which means it is goal-referenced and consistent. Goal-referenced feedback is always tied to a previously established goal or a learning objective. It indicates to a learner whether they are on course or off track. Students are sometimes unsure about overall content, language, and literacy goals and even about specific task objectives. It is important to make goals and learning objectives clear at the onset of the activity and remind our students about them throughout the task to help them see a clear trajectory in mind. This enables students to self-assess if they are completing the task successfully and adjust as necessary. When they receive feedback tied to the goals and objectives, it will inform them of their progress and the need for adjustment. Consistent feedback means providing direction and feedback that is stable, accurate, and trustworthy. A well-designed rubric, rather than general comments

like “B+” or “Super effort!” indicate that the teacher is focused on identified learning goals, has made evident what they are and how to get there. Using good rubrics as well as taking advantage of pre- and post-assessments to measure progress and evaluate specifically what each student needs to do to meet standards makes our feedback more goal-oriented and consistent, therefore, more targeted.

Specific

Effective feedback is specific, which means it is tangible and transparent, actionable, and user-friendly. Tangible and transparent feedback ensures that the direction students receive is substantial and concrete enough and that they understand what it means. Feedback also needs to be actionable, which means it leads to action. It must be descriptive enough that the student understands what they should do to correct the error and what they need to do differently in the future. Effective feedback is also specific in a way that it considers the recipient and as a result is user-friendly, which makes it more meaningful. User-friendly feedback is on the learner’s level. It does not include too much or too little information or information beyond or below their level of understanding. For example, if a teacher uses editing marks on a student’s paper, they need to make sure that their students understand what those editing marks mean, otherwise, such feedback is not user-friendly and therefore ineffective. In the classroom where peer feedback is used, it is useful to teach students basic principles of effective feedback and introduce related discourse so that they know how to speak to each other about and help each other effectively. Furthermore, using specific feedback allows teachers to use less-judgmental language. Explaining a specific observation of an error pattern and giving concrete suggestions that will move the student closer to the target, may make students more receptive to hearing it and acting upon it. Teachers should specifically point out what the student is doing right, clearly highlight what is amiss, as well as give concrete suggestions for improvement while restraining from judgment. Students are able to act when they are

given specific feedback in terms of tangible and transparent, actionable, and user-friendly. Specific feedback provides clear guidance on how to improve, invites action, is not overwhelming to students and they do not feel judged by it. It helps them identify specific ways to change, to listen with a learning orientation, and push themselves to improve.

Timely

Effective feedback is timely, meaning it is well-timed, prompt, and ongoing. Effective feedback must be given while the learning is still happening so that the students do not develop misconceptions and will remain invested in the subject matter. This requires a teacher's expert judgment. Teachers must decide, based on the learning task and knowing the student, how much feedback to give and whether a learning situation calls for written comments, conversation, demonstration, peer responses, or another option. It is also important for teachers to recognize when to abstain from giving feedback in order to allow students time to practice, test hypotheses, self-correct or negotiate as they work in a group. Evaluating students' work and providing feedback promptly presents a great challenge for many teachers. It is helpful to prioritize, pick the feedback focus, and recognize that 100% mastery may not be realistic for every assignment. However, there are other effective strategies to ease the overwhelming load of providing prompt feedback, such as using peer-feedback and self-evaluations, utilizing technology to automate feedback, and design more tangible feedback into the performance task itself. Additionally, utilizing feedback as a formative, ongoing, and frequent guidance rather than summative evaluation may allow more prompt turnaround and is ultimately more effective. Students might accept ongoing feedback more readily as it is less intimidating and they can use it quickly in a similar task and get new feedback on the improved performance. Providing many formative opportunities to adjust leads to desired performance and prepares students for success on summative assessments. In fact, the way we as teachers approach

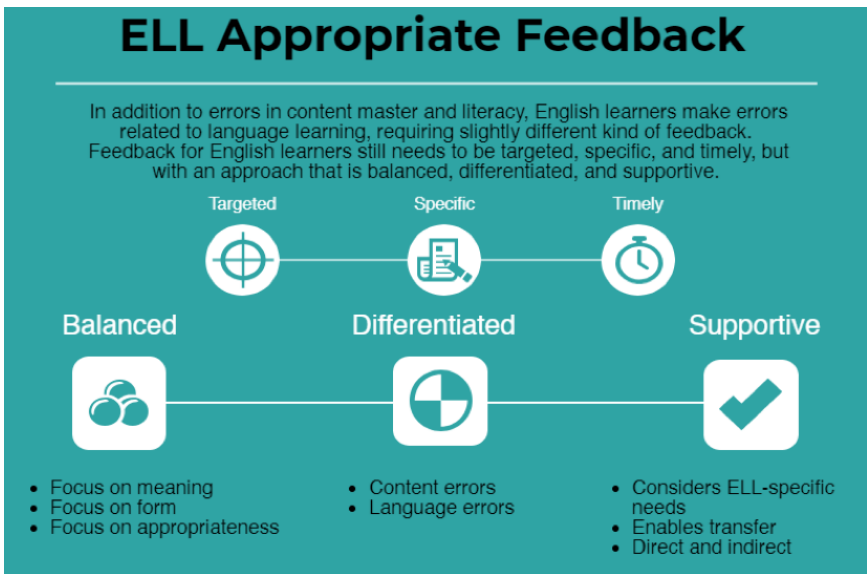
feedback does not only determine how our students interpret and respond to it but it also influences how they orient themselves toward learning. Providing ongoing low-threat objective feedback instead of non-specific numeric evaluations encourages students to view errors positively and develop a learning orientation, directed at improving their own competence, rather than a performance orientation, just caring about the outcomes and grades.

Teaching less and providing more feedback that is targeted, specific, and timely is necessary for supporting our students' learning and brings about better results. Although effective feedback generally meets the needs of most students, it will not always meet the needs of English learners (ELs). In addition to errors in content mastery and literacy, English learners make errors related to language learning requiring slightly different kind of feedback. For example, if you are immediately jumping in and correcting an English learner's grammar errors in class, you could argue that you were being targeted, specific, and timely and wonder why the errors keep occurring, or worse, not understand why that student no longer participates in class. The feedback that is appropriate for English learners requires special expertise.

Appropriate Feedback

The feedback that we provide to our English learners still needs to be targeted, specific, and timely, but in particular ways. Because of what we understand about the developmental nature and the role of errors in language learning, we recognize that feedback that is appropriate for English learners is also balanced, differentiated, and supportive. ELL appropriate feedback considers individual students' needs based on where they are developmentally and is constructed in relation to the reading, writing, speaking, listening that they produce. Teachers need to look for patterns in the student's work, see what the student knows and what kind of errors they make, and provide feedback

related to the next step in their growth. Many pressures cause teachers to fall into the habit of giving the same instruction and then praising those who do well and dismiss those who fail. However, we need to recognize that tailoring instruction and related feedback for every student based on their needs is our moral obligation and it is, in fact, constitutionally mandated. When teachers provide feedback appropriate for English learners, they demonstrate their understanding that language students have unique learning requirements and need individualized support.



Balanced

As teachers of ELs, we must always consider how we could use our feedback to help our learners move forward in their language acquisition. Balanced feedback builds on targeted feedback in a way that we recognize that the goal is to consistently balance attention to form, meaning, and appropriateness. Although many teachers focus on the correct form, which is grammatical correctness, attention to

meaning, and appropriateness are more meaningful for ELs and their development of communicative competence. When we consider that the primary purpose of language is to convey meaning, we will encourage our students to communicate the meaning as best as possible and use strategies to make themselves understood. Although using language correctly (focusing on form) helps English learners to communicate, the goal of many tasks is to communicate the intended information (focus on meaning). As teachers of ELLs, it is important that we balance our feedback by focusing on either meaning or form or both if appropriate and making sure that we make these goals clear from the beginning of an activity. When we help our students focus on meaning, we encourage them to use correct vocabulary terms. When we focus on form, we help them to use correct grammatical structures on word, sentence, and discourse levels. During the early stages of development, we can expect learners being able to use vocabulary items correctly within a specific context. We can also expect them to be able to correctly spell some words and use certain basic grammatical structures. Providing feedback on multiple and specialized meanings of words, their correct usage within a sentence, and expectation of grammatical correctness on a higher level is more realistic for advanced learners. Our feedback should match these expectations.

Providing balanced feedback also means attending to the sociocultural appropriateness of the learner's language as it may have the biggest social impact on the learner. Often unrecognized in language instruction, the importance of appropriateness becomes obvious when we cringe as a non-native language speaker uses language that does not fit the purpose, audience or context, even if the language is grammatically correct. Appropriateness is referred to using language that is suitable for a particular purpose and a particular audience in a particular social context. These social conventions of language use greatly vary across languages and cultures. In fact, research suggests that when native speakers judged the severity of errors, errors in appropriateness are considered more

serious than grammatical errors. Interestingly enough, language learners may not even recognize that they are making errors in appropriateness because they may not yet be familiar with the usage conventions of the new language and culture. Helping students recognize these cross-linguistic differences in specific circumstances and coaching them in using appropriate language for certain audiences in a certain context is just as important as helping them communicate meaning and use correct form. Raising awareness and activities that encourage noticing, as well as providing feedback on appropriateness errors are all beneficial in helping language learners improve their overall communicative competence. It is important that we help our language learners develop communicative competence by providing balanced feedback that focuses on meaning, form, and appropriateness.

An example of negative vs. positive politeness:

An English speaker compliments on the performance of one's daughter ("Your daughter did a wonderful job during her recital"). In American culture, it would be appropriate to respond using positive politeness ("Yes, thank you! She is really talented.") On the other hand, a Japanese speaker's cultural norms would encourage them to use negative politeness in response to this compliment ("Oh, she was quite lucky that day.") Consider how these responses would be interpreted and misunderstood by an individual from the other culture who is not aware of the "appropriate" way of responding to compliments.

Differentiated

Differentiated feedback builds on specific feedback and is related to the term differentiated instruction. In the context of feedback, differentiated means we determine if the error is content-related or language-related so we can adjust the feedback accordingly. With

language learners, errors occur on two levels—content and language. Students may understand the underlying concepts and ideas but might not use correct language to express it. When we identify that the error is language-related, our feedback would include both recognizing the correct conceptual understanding and identifying correct language form related to the concept. We can help the learner in multiple ways by modeling the correct language, helping the student practice proficiency-level appropriate language, bringing their attention to where the language appears in the text, and reminding them of or reteaching the grammatical rule. It is also possible that students demonstrate correct language, having “memorized” appropriate phrases and related language, appearing that they know the content but actually may not fully understand the concepts. We must always check that the understanding is there with the language. When we identify that the issue may be related to lack of content understanding, our feedback will look very different. We will need to make sure that we reteach or provide materials and support for the student to master the content together with related language.

Additionally, when we differentiate feedback, we need to make sure that there is not a mismatch in the feedback we are providing and the feedback the learner is receiving. For example, when a student says, “Sun set in the West” we could provide conversational feedback and respond, “Sun WHAT in the West?”, thinking that we are helping them notice subject-verb agreement but we may mislead them into questioning their use of a correct word or their content understanding. We need to be specific and provide differentiated feedback by making clear that their understanding is correct and at the same time helping them adjust their language to represent the correct form. When we plan to provide specific feedback to our ELLs, we need to consider that the error could stem from multiple reasons. Providing differentiated feedback requires that we first differentiate whether the error is due to lack of content understanding or if it is a language issue and then provide clear feedback that matches the underlying cause.

Supportive

Along with balanced and differentiated feedback, language learners need feedback that is supportive. Supportive feedback relates to issues of timely feedback in a sense that it needs to be prompt, ongoing, consistent, and provided in the right time as judged by the teacher based on the character of the task and student needs. Additionally, feedback that is supportive for English learners is provided in the right time considering unique needs of language learners and potentially dual nature of learning tasks to learn the content and acquire content-specific academic language as well as broader English proficiency. When the goal of the task is to communicate, we need to focus on providing feedback on the ability to communicate. When the goal of the task is to practice correct form based on the prior instruction, we should focus on correcting the grammatical form(s) that is being practiced. Correcting too many errors may frustrate the learner and halt their willingness to communicate and express their ideas. Recognizing patterns and developmental nature of errors helps us understand that in our feedback we should focus primarily on errors that our learners are ready to correct, not on errors that are beyond their developmental level.

Supportive feedback also enables the transfer of knowledge of language, content, skills, and strategies from the student's native language to English. Such feedback honors and validates what they already know even when their linguistic skills are still limited. When we correct errors and provide feedback in a way that is positive, non-intrusive and avoids embarrassing the student, it is often received more readily. Although direct feedback is valuable based on the task and student needs, teachers need to also recognize the value of feedback that is more subtle, interactive and communicative in nature. Rather than directly correcting, the teacher may recast and model correct language usage as part of an authentic conversation potentially raising awareness of the correct language form in a

natural way.

An example of supportive feedback through recasting:

Student: Teacher, yesterday I goed to store with my mom.

Teacher: You went to the store with your mom? I also went to the store with my daughter. What did you buy at the store?

When providing supportive feedback on student's writing, teachers should follow similar rules of considering the learner's needs and developmental level and attending to errors based on the task goals (i.e., focusing on conveying meaning vs. correct language form and differentiating between content and language errors). Providing supportive feedback on written work could also be direct and indirect. Although direct feedback and error correction may lead to a more accurate revision faster, providing less direct feedback that allows the student to self-correct may result in more enduring learning. This can be done by underlying the error and providing a clue but allowing the student to figure out the correct form on their own. However, a combination of direct and indirect feedback may be the best way to support our language learners, allowing them to figure out what they can on their own and moving them beyond by providing direct feedback or just-in-time instruction about language form that is slightly beyond their reach. Attending to the feedback that is balanced, differentiated, and supportive while keeping in mind characteristics of effective feedback as being targeted, specific, and timely enables us to attend to individual student needs and adjust our feedback to best support our English learners cognitive and linguistic development.

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Principles of Language Acquisition

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