

# Focus on accuracy in spoken English

Encouraging learners to correct their own errors

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*Feedback on written language is a routine component in the language classroom but do we spend much time helping students with the mistakes they make when speaking in the foreign language? This article describes a classroom exercise that helps learners focus on the accuracy of their spoken English. Groups of German university students examined recordings of their own English presentations and worked together to identify and solve the language problems that they found.*

## 1. Introduction

This article describes a classroom activity that helps learners to identify and reflect on language errors they make while speaking English in the classroom. Classroom feedback on language errors is more commonly associated with written work, when the teacher reads a student composition and marks any errors in red ink. For this reason, learners may have a fairly clear idea of the type of mistakes they make in their writing. However, the act of speech is temporary and does not provide a permanent record. Errors in speech can easily be overlooked by the speaker, and by listeners, both of whom may well be concentrating more on what is being said rather than how it is said. For this reason, learners might be forgiven if they have never seriously reflected on the accuracy of their spoken English.

The feedback activity described here allows students to do so by providing recordings of their oral performance and having them transcribe what they hear

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into a written text. Thus spoken English is transformed into a format that can be examined by the learner. The use of transcription has been reported, for example, from studies at a Scottish university (Lynch, 2001) and from one in Japan (Mennim, 2012). This article will describe how I used this transcription exercise with students at a German university. It will present some classroom data that shows what students can achieve while scrutinizing and correcting their own spoken English.

Transcription work that I have done with students in the past has shown the value of encouraging student self-correction. Although some teachers might have genuine concerns that corrections *per se* often do not result in uptake (students may learn little from them) or that peer-correction may be of low quality (Truscott, 1999), teachers using the activity have reported students making a serious effort in searching out and discussing errors, and that students are able to re-use self-corrected forms in subsequent output (Mennim, 2007, Stones, 2013).

## **2. The presentation course**

The course in this study was entitled *Englisch Hörverstehen und mündlicher Ausdruck* and was taken by a class of second-year students at Potsdam University in Germany. The course ran for approximately 15 weeks over one semester. It required students, working in groups of two or three, to research a topic of their own choice and give a classroom presentation to report what they had learned about it.

The classes included guidance on how to:

- structure a talk

- use memo cards so as not to rely on a script
- consider body language and voice quality

The students made two presentations during the semester. The first lasted around 10 minutes and the second lasted around 30 minutes. The shorter presentation was an ‘introduction’ presentation which is the focus of this article. It was given near the start of the semester shortly after the students had formed their groups and decided on their topics. For this introductory speech, the students were asked to address four points: to introduce their research topic; to explain why they had chosen it; to tell the audience something they already knew about their topic; and finally to describe what they wanted to find out about the topic in the weeks to come, thus indicating some research goal.

Each presentation was given in groups and an equal contribution was expected from each group member. The students chose a variety of topics, which seemed to reflect a general interest in society and culture with themes such as “Fashion and Identity” and “Street Art”. A general view of the content of these presentations will be seen in an example presented below.

### 3. The structure of the transcription exercise

|        |                                                       |
|--------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Step 1 | Record student presentations                          |
| Step 2 | Students transcribe their recordings                  |
| Step 3 | Student groups discuss and correct each transcription |
| Step 4 | Corrected transcriptions are given to the teacher     |
| Step 5 | Teacher makes any further necessary repairs           |
| Step 6 | Teacher returns transcripts to the students           |

Transcription exercise structure

So that the students could listen to their own English, I recorded each of the introduction presentations. Each student wore a clip-on microphone connected

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to a small portable MP3 recorder as they gave their section of the talk. After class, I sent each student their own audio file by email. (As an alternative method, I have in the past simply asked the students to make their own recording using their smart phones). The students' job was then to transcribe a section of their speech that they could then analyze in terms of language use. They were asked to type out their speech exactly as they heard it on the recording just as they heard it, including any mistakes, repetitions or hesitations. I advised them that it was not necessary to transcribe their entire speech and that one side of an A4 page with double-spaced typing would be enough to give them an idea of their oral performance and of the kind of mistakes they were making.

I asked for a double-spaced transcript to create enough space for both the students and the teacher to insert corrections. During the next lesson, the students went into their presentation groups and scrutinized the transcripts one by one, discussing any language problems they found and inserting their corrections in red ink into the text. They then passed their corrected transcript to me. In time for the next class, I looked over each paper and continued the correction process, marking any errors that the students had not managed to detect. This completed the exercise and I returned the transcripts to the students. In the next section, we will consider the students' success in finding errors and making corrections.

#### 4. Repairs made during the transcription exercise

Group

|           | Student repairs | Teacher repairs | Length of transcript (words) | Student repairs Per 100 words |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Student 1 | 7               | 4               | 282                          | 2.5                           |
| Student 2 | 9               | 13              | 284                          | 3                             |
| Student 3 | 22              | 8               | 200                          | 11                            |
| Student 4 | 27              | 14              | 456                          | 6                             |
| Student 5 | 22              | 43              | 597                          | 3.6                           |
| (average) | (17)            | (16.4)          | (364)                        | 5.2                           |

Solo

|           |    |    |     |     |
|-----------|----|----|-----|-----|
| Student 6 | 3  | 12 | 435 | 0.7 |
| Student 7 | 1  | 4  | 213 | 0.5 |
| Student 8 | 26 | 12 | 187 | 14  |

Number of repairs per transcript

The table above is split to separate Students 1-5 and Students 6-8. This is because the first five students corrected their transcripts in groups during class time, while Students 6, 7 and 8 did not attend class on the day of the activity and therefore made corrections by themselves as homework.

Although Student 8, working by herself, made a large number of self-repairs, Students 6 and 7 made far fewer corrections than the students who completed the exercise in groups. This greater number of corrections made during group work reflects a tendency I have observed over several years of using this exercise. First of all, because students possess different types of knowledge, group work offers a wider range of expertise. One student may be able to spot an error that another cannot see. Secondly, group work creates a collaborative dynamic. For example, one student may question a certain part of the transcript without being able to offer a specific repair. This nevertheless promotes engagement from other group members so that some repairs will represent a

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real 'group effort'. So, asking students to complete the exercise in groups encourages them to collaborate, share knowledge and lengthen the time they spend on task.

### **A closer look at a transcript**

We will now examine Student 3's performance: the transcript she produced and the corrections that she and her group came up with while they examined her speech. The transcript comes from the student's first presentation, which introduced her topic and set out the general aims of her research. Her group's research topic was the changing gender roles observable in movies from Walt Disney Studios.

To begin with, here is the transcript the student produced of her speech before any corrections were made (the unedited version). The first paragraph is from her prepared presentation while the second shorter paragraph is an extract from a reply she gave during the question and answer session that followed the presentation.

We all know that the role of women in our society has changed and it has also changed in Disney movies. Snow white is a good example for it. She is a naive girl and the evil queen wants to kill her. Well I think in the Disney movies now they portray women in another way so and the hero factor of the women is more portrayed now than in other movies and they are closer to the the men role. So the men are now the people who have to be rescued and the women do the role of the hero. So I think you cannot part it. The female and male role. So I think you have to watch at both aspects.

Yes. Well I did not like Aurora. She is a little bit silly I think. Because she

knows she should be killed by the needle in her finger and she goes there and she goes to the *Spinnrad* ... spinning wheel and she does it and then she falls asleep. And so it was clear that this would happen. So I did not understand why she does it. So I think why did she do it.

Below is a representation of Student 3's transcript after corrections were made both by the group and the teacher. Corrections are shown above the line: the students' ones in small capitals and the teacher's later feedback in brackets.

### Student 3's transcript corrections

We all know that the role of women in our society has changed and it has also changed in Disney movies. Snow  
(W) white is a good example <sup>THAT (of this)</sup> for it. She is a naive girl and the evil queen wants to kill her.

Well I think <sup>NOW</sup> in the Disney movies now they <sup>ARE</sup> portray <sup>-ING</sup> women in another way ~~se~~ and the <sup>(heroic potential)</sup> hero factor of the women is more <sup>EMPHASIZED</sup> portrayed now than in <sup>(previous)</sup> other movies and they are closer to the <sup>MALE</sup> men role. So <sup>NOW</sup> ~~the~~ men are <sup>ONES</sup> ~~now~~ the people who have to be rescued and the women <sup>HAVE (take)</sup> do the role of the hero. So I think you cannot <sup>DIVIDE (differentiate them)</sup> part it. The female and male role. So I think you have to <sup>CONCENTRATE ON</sup> watch at both aspects.

Well I did not like Aurora. She is a little bit silly I think. Because she knows she <sup>WOULD</sup> should be killed by the needle in her finger and she <sup>WALKS DOWN THE STAIRS</sup> goes there and she goes to

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the Spinnrad ... spinning wheel and she <sup>USES</sup> does it and then  
she falls asleep. And so it was <sup>OBVIOUS</sup> clear that this would  
happen. So I did not understand why she <sup>(did)</sup> does it. ~~So I~~  
~~think why did she do it.~~

## 5. Quality of correction

This section takes a closer look at the kind of changes the students made to the text. The students challenged 22 parts of the transcription, and as seen in the list below, their subsequent changes represent an improvement in formal accuracy.

The list indicates whether an originally non-target-like piece of language has been replaced with a target-like repair (NTL-TL) or whether something already target-like has been replaced by an equally target-like one (TL-TL).

### Student 3's transcript repairs

1. Snow White is a good example for it [that] TL-TL\*
2. I think [now] in the Disney movies ~~now~~ TL-TL
- 3.4. They ~~portray~~ [are portraying] women in another way ~~so~~ TL-TL\*: TL-TL
- 5.6. The hero factor of the women is more ~~portrayed~~ [emphasized] ~~now~~ NTL-TL; TL-TL
7. They are closer to the ~~men~~ [male] role NTL-TL
- 8.9.10. So ~~the~~ [now] men are ~~now~~ the ~~people~~ [ones] who TL-TL; TL-TL; TL-TL\*
11. The women ~~do~~ [have] the role of the hero NTL-TL
12. So I think you cannot ~~part~~ [divide] it NTL-NTL

- 13.14. I think you have to ~~watch~~ at [concentrate] [on] both aspects NTL-TL; NTL-TL
15. [I think] she is a little bit silly I~~think~~. TL-TL
16. She knows she ~~should~~ [would] be killed by the needle NTL-TL
17. She ~~goes there~~ [walks down the stairs] TL-TL\*
18. She goes to the *Spinnrad* [spinning wheel] NTL-TL
19. And she ~~does~~ [uses] it NTL-TL
- 20.21. And so it was ~~clear~~ [obvious] that this would happen. TL-TL; TL-TL\*
22. So I~~think why did she do it~~ (deletion) TL-TL

## Repair count

|                 |   |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|-----------------|---|
| Non-target-like | > | Target-like     | 8 |
| Target-like     | > | Target-like *   | 5 |
| Target-like     | > | Target-like     | 8 |
| Non-target-like | > | Non-target-like | 1 |
| Target-like     | > | Non-target-like | 0 |

So Student 3 and her group did a good job of correcting the transcript. In total they engaged with 22 different language points. Eight repairs are in the desired direction, changing an ‘incorrect’ English form into a more target-like form. I would suggest that a further five repairs (marked with an asterisk) also represent a successful outcome in terms of correction. Although, technically, they show an already correct form being replaced with another correct one, the resulting change represents an improvement, either stylistically or in terms of idiomatic collocation.

The students have used the transcription not only to correct errors but also to

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edit the text; for example the two occasions where the position of *now* is moved, and the elaboration that expands on the simple locative phrase 'goes there' to 'walks down the stairs'.

Another important point is that there are no examples of non-target-like forms replacing target-like forms, so the group did not introduce any errors into the transcript during the exercise. In fact, they made more corrections than I did myself during Step 5 of the activity. The group therefore managed to make the majority of repairs to this transcript and, as a teacher, I find this a satisfactory and encouraging outcome. It is interesting that Stillwell et al. (2010), in their own research into transcription, noticed a practice effect; that students were able to improve their correction rate over time as they completed more transcription activities.

This activity specifically allows students to choose which parts of their oral output they themselves want to focus on. This contrasts with more common styles of feedback when it is the teacher who determines which errors merit attention. Many teachers might agree that it is useful to give students the chance to decide for themselves which parts of language are the most relevant to their English performance.

## **6. Conclusion**

I have used transcription exercises regularly over the years to accompany classroom presentations and it has proved a popular activity. Students can gain a certain amount of satisfaction from correcting mistakes and improving parts of their speech. Because the exercise was based on an introductory presentation, working on the transcript could help to improve the second draft, which in this case was the final presentation that would be given later in the semester.

The use of transcription lets students know where they are going wrong but also where they are going right: the target-like English can be confirmed while the non-target-like can be corrected. Most students comment that listening to their own spoken English is a novelty. Considering the opportunity it gives them to focus on language form, perhaps more students might appreciate the chance to really hear what they are saying.

### References

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## 話し言葉の英語における正確さ

メニム ポール

英語の教室では書き言葉へのフィードバックが日常的に行われているが、話し言葉の誤りに自ら気づかせるための時間は十分に割かれているだろうか？本稿では、学習者が英語スピーキングの正確性を高められる授業演習を紹介する。具体的には、ドイツ人大学生のグループが自身の英語プレゼンテーションを録音したものを確認し、気づいた言語上の問題を共同で特定・解決する取り組みを紹介している。