Coaching, Not Correcting

An Alternative Model for Minority Students

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Introduction

The debate on the role of oral corrective feedback or *repair* in English instruction settings has been going on for over 30 years. Some educators believe that oral grammar correction is effective because they have noticed that students who learned a set of grammar rules were more likely to use them in real life communication (Krashen, 1985; Ming-chu & Hung-chun, 2009). Other researchers found quite the opposite. Their findings revealed that oral grammar correction did not always help students learn to speak grammatically (Truscott, 1996, 1999; Krashen, 1982); instead, grammar correction interfered with meaning making.

The problem with this debate is that it is often approached from a cognitive-only point of view. It rarely focuses on the affective and relational aspects of language instruction and learning (Krashen, 1992; Razfar, 2010). This can be problematic because it has been well documented that how students feel about school and about others impact how well they do in school (Dresser, 2013; Elias, Bruene-Butler & Blum, 1997; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003; Krashen, 1992).

Some of the students who are often negatively affected by corrective feedback are minority students. African American vernacular English and Chicano English are often referred to as "broken" Englishes or "improper" talk. Asato (2006) noted that such ideologies of intelligence concerning non-standard English varieties have serious consequences for the speakers, particularly for children in schools.

Language ideologies are grounded

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"in the idea that how we conceptualize language and language use is indicative of how we think about language users themselves" (Razfar, 2010, p.14). Non-standard" forms of English are often seen as "bastardized" forms to be corrected through participation in highly structured educational settings. The belief that non-standard versions of English interfere with academic achievement masks the complex understandings and ideologies of language as they are to race, ethnicity, and class (Asato, 2006; Lippi-Green, 1998).

Many educators struggle to reverse-popular perceptions of non-standard speakers as stupid or lazy by praising the beauty and power of these varieties of English. This is sometimes a narrow view of language instruction as it can neglect the social-emotional aspect of language learning. It also leaves teachers wondering whether or not error correction in English instruction is a good practice.

English learners (ELs) represent the fastest growing group of the U.S. school-age population (Butler & Hakuta, 2009; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). This group has, however, one of the highest high school dropout rates in the country. Hamilton Boone (2013) found that most students leaving school without a high school diploma came from 2,000 urban schools with a population that includes large numbers of minority and poor students.

Minority children experience many difficulties in school that can be re-framed as the results of cultural and linguistic "mismatchs" between the school and home (Banks, 2001). Due to the proximity with Mexico, many people in Texas, California, Arizona, and New Mexico speak what is known as "Spanglish." They will refer to truck as the "troka," the yard as the "yarda," the dry-cleaning store as the "washateria," and so on. They give English words phonetic sounds found in Spanish.

This raises the question of whether or not to classify the the forms of English

that linguistic minority children speak as distinctly separate languages? Or are they dialects of English? Just what is a language? The problems of defining these non standard varieties impede the creation of strong policy agendas.

The Oakland Ebonics controversy in the mid-1990s exemplifies the policy effects of language definition. The Oakland School Board sought federal money to support speakers of Ebonics, which created a firestorm of opposition. The main controversy came from people who did not see Ebonics as anything more than slang at best (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Rickford, 1999). With the lack of a strong direction, most public educators fall back on the default deficit language ideologies of so called "non-standard" English and subsequently minority speakers have been treated as 'broken" and in need of "repair" (Asato, 2006). This alienates students because their culture and language are given a lesser status that the dominant Standard English.

The Corrective Approach

Thus well-intentioned, corrective feedback practices with emphasis only on form without a critical examination of the underlying assumptions about the function and purposes of language use can be more harmful than beneficial (Razfar, 2010). Oral corrective feedback is specifically damaging if students feel criticized. Students who engage in oral reading activities and are preoccupied about "sounding right" will tend to focus only on decoding the text. In doing this, they will miss the opportunity to construct meaning and to learn.

There is substantive evidence showing that students caught up in a distressful emotion have a more challenging time meeting their academic goals (Jensen, 2008; Goleman, 2006; Sylwester, 2006), whereas, students with positive self-image tend to excel in school (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004).

One oral practice that can be especially stressful for students is oral reading, most often done in the form of Round Robin Reading (RRR). During RRR, the teacher and students take turns reading a passage or a selection to the whole class. Even though researchers have documented many problems associated with this practice and its variations (e.g., popcorn reading), these activities continue to be used as a default method to increase oral reading fluency and reading comprehension (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998).

The interruptive nature of turn-taking in RRR and the fact that students are usually unprepared for the task make activities like this one extremely challenging for students. This is especially true for English learners (ELs) who sometimes lack the vocabulary and the understanding of the structure of English (August & Hakuta, 1997; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Beginning ELs and other less proficient readers can stumble through the text and mispronounce words, which can be not only embarrassing for the students but also of no instructional value.

RRR can also highlight ELs' miscues because feedback usually takes the form of correction feedback and *repair*. The teacher and the other students often correct the reader's pronunciation and/or grammatical errors. This can exacerbate the reader's anxiety level. The more intense the pressure students feel, the less ability they have to focus, pay attention, and use the skills they have to solve problems and comprehend text (Elias, et al, 1997; Dresser, 2013; Goleman, 2006).

Rachel, one of our teacher candidates, once wrote a paper on how challenging reading aloud was for her. She explained,

> Because I wasn't a proficient reader, I dreaded when the teacher called on me to read in class. The reading portion was OK, but I was stuck on the comprehension portion. As I read, I felt I was reading the words but somehow the language was different and I couldn't explain what I had read. To this day, it is difficult [for me] to read in a group of people.

An Alternative Model

Rather than abandoning reading aloud and oral practices altogether, we offer an alternative instructional *coaching model*. In this coaching instructional model, the orientation of feedback is supportive, timely, nonjudgmental, and aimed at learning. In this model form-teaching and meaning-focus instruction are not dichotomous. In this *coaching model* grammar is taught in meaningful and communicative way. In this high-quality literacy instruction model all students, including a delayed reader like Rachel, receive ample support and opportunities to develop oral language skills.

In this article we define content learning as the opportunities students have to learn language and content-related material. In contrast, social-emotional learning (SEL) deals with the process by which we learn to recognize our emotions, make good decisions, and develop positive relationships (Elias, et al, 1997). There are five main SEL competencies. These can be found on the Collaborative for Academic and Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL) website and they are as follows:

1. *Self-management*: The ability to regulate our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different circumstances (e.g., managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, setting and working toward achieving goals).

2. *Self-awareness*: The ability to identify and recognize our emotions and thoughts and their impact on behavior (e.g., recognizing our strengths, needs, and values; possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism).

3. *Responsible decision-making*: The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety, social norms, understanding of consequences of our actions, and the well-being of others and ourselves.

4. *Relationship skills*: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with others (e.g., communicating clearly, listening attentively, working cooperatively, managing conflict constructively and requesting and providing help when necessary).

5. *Social awareness*: The ability to accept the perspective and have empathy for others, to understand social norms for behavior appreciate diversity; and to recognize family, school, and community resources and support.

In the following sections Ivonne, a second-grade bilingual teacher, clearly implements the main components of a coaching model which are: (a) setting a supportive learning environment, (b) planning instruction that is relevant to students, (c) promoting active learning, (d) rehearsing, (e) narrowing the topic and, (f) coaching using nonjudgmental feedback.

Supportive Learning Environment

The first step in designing a coaching method of instruction is to establish a supportive learning environment. In these classrooms there must be a sense of solidarity and respect between teacher and students and between the students themselves. This creates a condition in which all participants care for and respect one another. This sense of solidarity is an essential condition for teachers and students to view feedback as a tool for authentic meaning-making rather than just correcting and evaluating (Razfar, 2010).

In the beginning of the school year Ivonne spent the first week of school infusing the teaching of social-emotional skills into the second-grade curriculum. She began by making sure students felt comfortable with one another. She used a method called *emotional coaching,* which was developed by John Gottman (1997). In this technique teachers know their students well and learn about their emotions. They do this by: (a) placing the students' experiences into an adult context (how would the teacher feel if the principal was condescending); (b) using uncomfortable situations to discuss emotions; (c) validating the students' emotions; (d) helping students' label the emotion; and (e) helping students solve the problem that emerged as result of the emotion.

Ivonne invited students to help outline the routines and behavior expectations for the class. In doing this she helped children recognize and label their emotions and answer prompts like: "When I am mad I .. and, When I don't like something I…." Volunteers modeled appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and the class provided feedback. Ivonne recorded on the board all of the students' comments. The feedback that did not relate to the topic of discussion was recorded (with permission from the students) in the "Parking Lot" chart.

Later, the class revisited the topics on this chart. Students who authored the comments decided whether or not their comments addressed the topic of discussion. If they did not, the student erased the comment. If it did, the student added the comment to the class "Topic Wall" for further discussion. The class discussed and wrote the meaning of new vocabulary such as *respect, care, fair,* and *appropriate*.

The class also had a discussion on what they wanted others to call them. Some children chose their nicknames and others their real names. They also discussed and answered questions like, how they wanted to be "*corrected*." What type

of corrective feedback helped them? Most children wanted only the teacher to correct their errors and not other students. "Put-downs" were not accepted in Ivonne's class. Students preferred one-on-one feedback or small group workshops.

While working in groups students learned to communicate clearly, listen attentively, and work cooperatively. These steps led to mutual respect and as a result increased the students' understanding of social awareness.

Instruction That Is Relevant to Students

It is important to select topics of instruction that are relevant to the students. Once Ivonne had established a safe environment for children, she planned a series of lessons linked by a common theme, *immigration*. She began the unit by asking students to share aloud their own experiences about moving to a new place. She also shared her parents' experiences and feelings leaving El Salvador during the civil war. What do you do when you are angry, lonely or afraid? These questions served as a catalyst for a discussion on self-awareness skills.

The class later embarked on an imaginary journey of immigration. Every day the teacher and the students brought artifacts, photographs, and old documents to share with the class. This exchange of experiences gave the class the opportunity to speak about their emotions and/or those of their relatives moving to a new place and learning to speak another language.

The children were asked to select books from a section of the class library that dealt with immigration. The class selected two books. One was *Watch the Stars Come Out* by Riki Levinson, which is about a grandmother who tells her granddaughter the story of her own mother's trip, on a lareg boat, to America. The other book the class selected was *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* by Amy Hest, which is about a young girl from an Eastern European village who leaves her beloved grandmother for a new life in America.

Prior to reading these books the class discussed and recorded key vocabulary such as *immigration*, *travel,* and *voyage*. Students who are familiar with the content and vocabulary have a better chance of understanding the reading (Krashen, 1992). They also learned SEL vocabulary (e.g., lost, confused, pleasant, and gentle) which they recorded in their personal dictionaries.

Active Learning

Reading activities, in which students are actively involved, are effective because they can increase students' phonological awareness in English as well as their metacognitive skills (Butler & Hakuta, 2009). All students in Ivonne's class had a copy of the two books and were engaged at all times. Ivonne modeled by reading a selection aloud, making sure to enunciate and speak clearly. She invited students to read by saying: "*when I read…* and the students responded, "*we read*," as a choir. This helped students relaxed because no one was singled out to read.

Ivonne also modeled and explicitly taught comprehension strategies. She pretended to think aloud and asked questions like: "*What do I already know about immigration? What do I need to do to make sure I understand the reading? What if I don't understand?*" The class answered these questions orally and later in writing. Ivonne invited students to write with her by saying, "*when I write…*" and the class responded "*we write*."

She also used other interactional tasks like role-play and group work to teach language form (grammatical structure of words, e.g., man/men) and function (purpose of language, e.g., giving directions). During class discussions Ivonne carefully chose the language she used, making sure to include the vocabulary (social-emotional and content) the class was learning. She made sure not to use jargon and idiomatic speech. It has been found that this form of language can be confusing, specifically for students learning English (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004; & Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

Rehearsed Reading

Students have a better chance of succeeding during oral reading activities when they can rehearse the reading. After whole class reading activities, the students in Ivonne's class had the opportunity to reread the selection with a partner. Rather than having students participate in a RRR, Ivonne provided multiple opportunities for students to engage in oral reading away from public scrutiny. The children took the books home and practiced the reading with their parents. Less proficient English students stayed with Ivonne after class and read the book several times using choral reading techniques.

This strategy can also be used to model how to read with fluency and prosody (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005), while providing

a safe environment where students do not feel singled out. It is important to note that many ELs are proficient readers and writers in their primary language when they enter school in the U.S. (Cummins, 1989; Echevarria, & Short, 2004). What they need is more time and opportunities to learn vocabulary, participate in reading-based activities and develop oral fluency in English (Jong & Harper, 2005).

At the end of the week, students were asked to take turns and read aloud some of their favorite sections of the books, which they had marked using a post-it. Because the students had enough preparation and opportunities to rehearse the reading, learn the vocabulary, and comprehend the material, they read aloud fluently and at ease.

Narrowing the Topic

Selecting the proper materials is just as important as building background knowledge and rehearsing. For example, Ivonne' class read books and brought and discussed memorabilia that were linked by a common theme, *immigration*. Students learn language and concepts when they have multiple opportunities to use the same language and revisit concepts (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). It may take students up to 90 exposures to the same word for them to be able to make the word part of their repertoire (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

For example, knowing how to spell and read the word *immigration* is not enough. Students need to understand it's meaning from a political a sociological perspective and must be able to comprehend its connection with other related terms like citizenship and visa. This is the reason why Ivonne used Narrow Reading, which is reading from the same topic, author, or genre.

This method has been found to be effective because students are immersed in the same language, theme or writing style for a long period of time (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005; Gardner, 2008). This provided Ivonne's students with the opportunity to recycle the vocabulary and understand the concepts dealt with in this unit of study.

Nonjudgmental Feedback

All students, but particularly ELs, must receive ongoing, clear, and specific feedback that is nonjudgmental. It is not enough to tell a student "*you did a good job*" or "*develop that idea better*." Instead it is necessary to carefully and thoughtfully provide feedback that it is comprehensible

to students. For example, Ivonne told one student "*I like how you changed the tone of your voice when another character appeared in the story*." This direct feedback enables students to see what they are doing right and how they can improve without embarrassing them.

Students, who might not know how to develop an idea better, would benefit by comments and probing questions such as: "*The people in the boat were afraid, that is correct.*" And "*Why do you think they were afraid? Can you tell me something else that was important?*" This type of feedback shows that the teacher acknowledged the student's thinking while offering an *invitation* to elaborate on her comment.

The language development stages of ELs and native speakers of English are very similar. Early in the developmental process both native and nonnative speakers of English use short utterances like "mom hear." As their language skills develop, they may make generalizations such as saying foots instead of feet and fishes instead of fish. As long as the error students make during oral reading does not change the meaning of the text there is no need to correct it. Instead it is recommended to look for patterns (e.g., omitting suffixes) and later address the student' need in a mini-lesson.

If the error interferes with the meaning of the text several error techniques might be used. The student can reread the word. If the student cannot decode the word properly the teacher aids the student by reading the word aloud and then the student continues reading. In Ivonne's class, Maria read "harber" instead of "harbor." Ivonne read, "harbor" and then the student continued reading. Instead of stopping the reading to tell the students what they did wrong the teacher may model how to read the word correctly and move on.

Children have the ability to monitor their own language production and therefore benefit from modeling techniques (Krashen, 1992). If they say, "I like the fishes" the teacher may respond, "I like fish too." The monitor model provides a rational for error correction in that the teacher may utilize students' skills (e.g., auditory) to enhance learning.

Conclusion

It is important to do away with the corrective feedback or *repair* type instructional model that currently exists in many classrooms, where students are perceived

as broken and need to be fixed. Instead it is necessary to establish a coaching model in which teachers support and guide their students in learning. In this model, teachers weave the teaching of social-emotional skills throughout the curriculum. Teacher-students, and students-students, have a strong and respectful relationship.

Students learn to recognize their own emotions and to make good decisions. They learn to respect and have empathy for others. In such a classroom students are more willing to take risks and read aloud because they know that they will not be reprimanded. On the contrary, because students have had enough time to rehearse, they know that they have a good chance of doing well.

Children understand that learning is a process and they are more open to the teacher's feedback. Because teachers know their students well, they can select topics of study that are interesting and pertinent to the students' lives and experiences. These topics can be studied in depth. In doing this, the students will have multiple exposures to the same language and concepts.

The process of focusing feedback as coaching positions the English learner as a thinker rather than someone who is unintelligible and, subsequently, not intelligent. Through these interactions students can learn English (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, language form and function) and thus increase their reading fluency and language comprehension

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