FEEDBACK AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL STUDIES

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Galina Kavaliauskienė

Mykolas Romeris University Ateities St. 20, Vilnius LT-08303 Tel. No.: (8 5) 271 4 613 E-mail: gkaval@mruni.eu

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Irena Darginavičienė

Mykolas Romeris University Ateities St. 20, Vilnius LT-08303 Tel. No.: (8 5) 271 4 613 E-mail: ukk@mruni.eu

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Abstract

In language studies, feedback has always been a contradictory issue and a matter of debate among teachers. The research into the effects of feedback has been far from conclusive. Recently there has been a renewed interest in feedback in teaching general English in secondary education. The issue of feedback at tertiary education remains unexplored and needs to be examined. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine learner attitudes to feedback at tertiary level. The data were collected through administering a questionnaire and interviewing students who study English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University. The article examines oral, paper- and electronically-written as well as peer feedback of performance. The major result is: at university level, feedback is beneficial independently of students' specialization. Some possible implications are suggested.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, oral and written teacher / peer feedback, university level.

Introduction

Error correction, or feedback, has been used in language teaching / learning for a long time, but its benefit has been questioned by some language teachers. Currently feedback seems to undergo a revival stage as a useful teaching device in General English (Allah, 2008; Brandt, 2008; Wang, 2008). It is argued in favour of delivering feedback as a tool which can help develop writing and speaking skills as well as learn grammar and vocabulary. However, at university level the issue of feedback has been examined passingly and there is not sufficient research into learners' attitudes to feedback in English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

This paper aims at investigating students' attitudes to feedback and drawing conclusions about its suitability at university level.

The objective of the research: to explore learners' attitudes to correction as a language learning tool in oral, electronically- and paper-written work as well as to peer correction of mistakes.

Research methods used: 1) a survey of students' perceptions of teachers' feedback in various class activities, statistical treatment of students' responses using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software (SPSS) in order to establish the level of significance for the statistically small sample of participants, and analysis of various types of feedback provided by either teachers or peers; 2) learner self-assessment of oral and written performance obtained either during individual interviews or recorded in their weblogs.

The respondents in this study are the students of two different specializations, social work and psychology, who study English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania.

1. Literature Review

In this section, we examine previous research into positive and negative feedback in the English classroom, teachers' and learners' preferences for error correction and the latest technological developments that provide the learner with various levels of interactivity. It should be noted that available research papers focus on feedback in General English in secondary schools. There is a lack of research into error correction in higher education, i.e. in English for Specific Purposes classes which aim at teaching vocational language.

1.1. Three Categories of Mistakes

In linguistics, the definitions of 'mistake' and 'error' are rather diverse. W. Ancker claims: 'A mistake is a performance error that is either a random guess or a slip, it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. An error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner' (2000: 20).

J. Edge (1989) suggests classifying mistakes into three categories: slips, errors and attempts. 'Slips' are mistakes that students can correct themselves; 'errors' are mistakes that students cannot correct themselves; 'attempts' are students' intentions of using the language without knowing the right way. In this article, either the most common linguistic term 'error' or the students' preferred term 'mistake' will be used interchangeably.

1.2. Evaluative and Formative Feedback

Feedback may be defined as information supplied to learners about their performance on a task, by a peer or a tutor, with a view to improving language skills. It encompasses not only correcting learners, but also assessing them. Both correction and assessment depend on mistakes being made, reasons for mistakes, and class activities. The science and art of teaching English support the idea that not all errors should be corrected (Harmer, 2000). It is based on the fact that errors are normal and unavoidable during the learning process. The nature of teacher correction differs widely among teachers and classes and depends on such factors as course objectives, assignment objectives, marking criteria, individual student expectations, strengths, weaknesses, and attitude toward writing (Harmer, 2000). Current theories of how people learn languages suggest that habit formation is only one part of the process. There are many reasons for errors to occur: interference from the native language, incomplete knowledge of the target language, or its complexity (Edge, 1989). Some researchers suggest that feedback to L2 writing falls somewhere between two extremes—evaluative or formative feedback (McGarrell and Verbeem, 2007). Evaluative feedback typically passes judgement on writing, reflects on sentence-level errors, and takes the form of directives for improvement on assignments. Formative feedback, which is sometimes referred to as facilitative, typically consists of feedback that takes an inquiring stance towards the text. Most of the research into feedback has dealt with the role of negative feedback in secondary education (Edge, 1989). Negative feedback can be classified into different types that include 'recasts', i.e. the reformulation of all the parts of a student's utterance, minus the error, implicit negative feedback, and explicit negative feedback (Sakai, 2004).

1.3. Different Attitudes to Error Correction

According to Ancker (2000), error correction remains one of the most misunderstood issues in foreign language teaching, and there is no consensus about it. Correction is considered to be more effective when it is focused, descriptive rather than evaluative, contains a moderate amount of positive feedback with a selected and limited amount of negative feedback, and allows for response and interaction (Brandt, 2008).

The research into the effects of error correction is far from conclusive. Some authors suggest that error correction is ineffective and should be abandoned (Truscott, 1996). P. Wang (2008) describes a case study which shows that some students may emotionally respond to face threatening situations. Therefore, positive affective comments should be offered first to encourage learners and reduce the tension caused by error correction. Thus the hazards of demotivating students will be avoided.

Surprisingly, little research has explored important aspects of teachers' and learners' preferences for feedback. According to I.Leki's (1991) survey of 100 learners' preferences for error correction, good writing in English is equated with error-free writing, and, moreover, learners expect and want all errors in their papers to be corrected. Additionally, in another survey of 47 learners' attitudes towards classroom feedback, H. Enginarlar (1993) reports that they perceive surface-level error correction as effective teacher feedback. In the study that investigated 824 students' and 92 teachers' beliefs about error correction, R. Schulz (1996) reported some opinion discrepancies among teachers as well as between teachers and learners. His study revealed that learners are more receptive to receiving corrective feedback in both written and spoken language than teachers. A follow-up study by Schulz (2001) compares his 1996 data with the responses elicited from 607 students and 122 teachers in Colombia. It reveals a relatively high agreement between students as a group and teachers as a group across cultures on most questions. D. Nunan (1993) presents a study that examines the relationship between the attitudes of learners and teachers to various activities. The data show a clear mismatch between learners' and teachers' views in all but one activity, namely, conversation practice. The results of Nunan's study show that error correction receives a very high priority of 7 out of 10 points among learners, and a very low priority of 2 among teachers. The comparison of teachers' and learners' preferences for error correction is analyzed by Rula L. Diab (2006), who reveals various discrepancies between their preferences for feedback as well as the differences in beliefs among instructors themselves. Diab recommends that teachers incorporate classroom discussions on error correction in order to help their students understand how feedback is intended to affect their writing.

Ancker (2000) examined teachers' and learners' expectations regarding error correction. In his survey, 25% of 802 teachers and 76% of 143 learners indicated believing that all errors should be corrected. The most frequent reason given by teachers for not wanting correction was the negative impact of correction on learner confidence and motivation, and the most frequent reason given by learners for wanting correction was the importance of learning to speak English correctly. The results of the study were significant in revealing the opposing expectations of teachers and students about how errors should be handled.

1.4. Peer and Electronic Feedback

The use of peer feedback in English writing classroom has been generally supported as a potentially valuable aid for its social, cognitive, affective, and methodological benefits. The affective advantage of peer response over teacher response is that it is less threatening, less authoritarian, and more supportive, but students judge it as less helpful; however, 80% of peers' comments were considered valid, and only 7% seen as potentially damaging (Rollinson, 2005).

Electronic feedback has drawn researchers' interest for more than two decades (Allah, 2008). Incorporating e-feedback along with face-to-face modes has been shown to yield the best results in terms of the quality of feedback and the impact on revisions. However, according to Allah (2008), English teachers should deal with integrating electronic feedback with a balance of enthusiasm and caution because adopting new trends without careful planning can negatively influence students' performance.

Research into feedback on oral production is very scarce. However, language practitioners are aware that many learners fail to notice their own mistakes in impromptu speaking. Error feedback and its effect on noticing errors in verbal production are explored by H. Sakai (2004), who pays particular attention to recasts, i.e. feedback defined as reformulation of L2 learners' erroneous utterances by the teacher, but with errors omitted.

1.5. ICT: Towards Interactivity

The application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) provides vast advantages in language teaching / learning. A new direction by introducing video feedback is suggested by R. Stannard (2008) who emphasizes its numerous benefits and claims that several organizations, including Coventry University and the University of Edinburgh, have begun their own research into the application of video feedback. The latest technological developments can provide the learner with various levels of interactivity. A number of software packages produced by the TELL Consortium ensure immediate interactive feedback (Davies and Hewer, 2009). The students who used this software indicated the satisfaction with immediate feedback on the computer.

2. Rationale for the Study

This study addresses the attitudes to feedback in various class activities. To be more precise, the research focuses on the usefulness of various correction types and the ways of delivering feedback.

The above review of the relevant literature shows that the issue of feedback at tertiary education remains unexplored; therefore, the types of beneficial feedback at university level need to be examined. It is a matter of great relevance to teachers to find out what students' views on error correction are and what trends are dominant. It is also important to investigate if learners specializing in different subjects need the same types of feedback.

3. Participants and Data Collection

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University. The participants were students specializing in either social work or psychology and studying English for Specific Purposes (24 students of psychology and 26 students of social work). They were predominantly females at the intermediate or post-intermediate English levels. The amount of time spent by students in the L2 environment was 4 hours per week for 2 semesters, which amounts to about 130 hours of English instruction.

The data were collected through administering a specially designed questionnaire in accordance with the accepted standards in Social Sciences (Dornyei, 2003). The questionnaire was administered to all participants, and the analysis of responses was carried out. The obtained data were statistically processed using the SPSS software, interpreted and discussed by the authors.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Results

Students' responses regarding their attitudes to feedback are summarized in Table 1. The columns show the percentages of responses to the statements. The students rated each statement according to the five-point Likert scale by circling the appropriate number: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree. For the sake of brevity, both positive responses 'strongly agree' and 'agree' and negative responses 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' are added up. This approach does not distort the data. On the contrary, it allows displaying the findings in a compact way. The first column in Table 1 includes the survey statements. Three other columns show the percentage of psychology (PS) and social work (SW) students who disagreed, were not sure, or supported the statements.

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Survey statements		Disagree (%)		Not sure (%)		Agree (%)	
	PS	SW	PS	SW	PS	SW	
1 Mistakes are natural	9	5	24	9	67	86	
2 Immediate teacher's correction is preferable	13	11	13	41	74	48	
3 Teacher's correction is generally effective	1	4	2	5	97	91	
4 Hard to notice my own mistakes	30	30	13	16	57	55	
5 All mistakes in speaking must be corrected	30	14	40	22	30	64	
6 All mistakes in writing must be corrected	4	4	8	2	88	94	
7 Correction of oral errors in class undermines the learner's self-esteem	39	44	43	29	18	27	
8 Individual correction of mistakes in writing is useful	2	2	4	-	94	98	
9 Peer feedback is beneficial	45	50	40	30	15	20	

¹ The first percentage in the columns refers to the responses of psychology students, and the second percentage—to the responses of social work students.

1st Statement. Making mistakes in learning English is natural.

The first row of Table 1 demonstrates the participants' opinions on making mistakes in the language acquisition process. The majority of participants (67% of psychology students and 86% of social work students) feel that mistakes in learning are unavoidable. Moreover, in the interviews they claim that it is important to think about one's own mistakes in order to learn from them. The percentage of doubters is rather high (24% and 9%), while negative responses are few (9% and 5%). However, the point the majority of learners emphasize in their interviews is that awareness of mistakes leads to linguistic development.

2nd Statement. Students prefer immediate teacher's correction of errors.

As many as 74% of the students in the first group and 48% of the second group support this statement, while 41% of the second group are not sure. The number of negative responses is similar in both specializations: 13% and 11%. From the practical viewpoint, it is impossible for teachers to correct mistakes immediately, particularly in conversation classes. Any interruption of communication might ruin the activity. The misleading perception of the usefulness of immediate corrections probably lies in the respondents' experience at school, where some teachers feel it is their duty to make corrections as soon as possible. As it has been mentioned in the literature review section, the idea of immediate correction seems to be evaluative rather than formative, which is preferable.

3rd Statement. Teacher's correction is generally effective.

Essentially, the great majority (97% and 91%) of participants acknowledge the effectiveness of correction. The percentage of uncertain responses varies between 2% and 5%, negative responses were given by 1% and 4% of the students. This clearly demonstrates learners' positive perception of correction.

4th Statement. Students find it hard to notice their mistakes.

The findings for this statement are quite straightforward: over a half of the respondents agree with the point (57% and 55%), and almost one third (30% and 30%) disagree. The percentage of doubters is rather small (2% and 5%). Obviously, this statement refers to the personal perception of each respondent, and the differences in views are natural.

5th Statement. Teachers should correct all students' mistakes in speaking.

The attitudes to this statement differ significantly depending on specialization. About two-thirds of would-be psychologists either support or oppose the claim, and the rest 40% are not sure. The majority of the students of the other specialization (64%) agree, while 14% disagree, and 22% are not sure.

6th Statement. Teachers should correct all students' mistakes in writing.

Students' concern with the development of writing skills is predominant in comparison to other language skills and is conditioned by the examination requirements which include writing a summary of ESP texts. Statistics of responses reflects that 88% and 94% back this statement with a few learners either opposing (4% and 4%) or uncertain (8% and 2%). Learners are aware of writing difficulties and potential pitfalls they encounter in writing activities, thus, feedback seems extremely important. Students keep making the same common mistakes that have been repeatedly pointed out to them. It is widely accepted that there are two distinct causes for the errors: L1 interference and developmental errors (Harmer, 2000). These errors are part of the students' interlanguage, i.e. the version a learner has at the current stage of development.

7th Statement. Teacher's correction of a student's oral errors in front of the class undermines the learner's self-esteem.

Students do not seem to worry about undermining their self-esteem: their responses are similar and either negative (39% and 44%) or uncertain (43% and 29%). This is good news to teachers—error correction is not expected to affect learners' motivation or willingness to perfect language skills.

8th Statement. Teacher's individual correction of students' written mistakes is useful for learning ESP.

The vast majority of students (94% and 98%) are positive about the usefulness of individual error correction as it facilitates personal learning. A personalized learning of the language and getting relevant feedback to one's performance are very important for the development of language awareness.

9th Statement. Peer feedback is beneficial.

Surprisingly, students do not find peers' feedback beneficial—only the minority supports this statement. Almost half of the learners either disagree with the statement or are not sure. A possible cause of such a perception is unfounded fears of being criticized in public.

Summing up the findings, learners' responses are quite straightforward and unambiguous. To prove the point, however, the study must rely on statistical evaluation of the data as the number of respondents in this research is limited. The following section briefly describes the statistical procedure and the interpretation of the results.

4.2. Statistical Processing of Data

The obtained data was processed statistically in order to determine how comparable and reliable the data are. Similarly to our previous paper on alternative assessment of performance (Kavaliauskienė et al, 2007), internal consistency reliability was calculated by computing Cronbach Alpha coefficient, which was 0.80 in a good agreement with the theory (Dornyei, 2003). The experimental findings were processed using the SPSS. The Means and Standard Deviations for the responses of the students were computed, and the t-test in data analysis was applied. The t-test is the most frequently used measure in second language research when comparing mean scores for two groups. It is important to emphasize that t-test can be used successfully with very large or very small groups. The detailed reasoning for the application of this statistical treatment is described in the previous research (Kavaliauskienė et al, 2007) and is omitted from the present paper for the sake of brevity. The adjustment for group size is made by evaluating the degrees of freedom, which are determined by subtracting one from the number of participants in each group and then adding the two resulting numbers together. Here the degree of freedom df = 48. The computation results, i.e. the Means, Standard Deviations, critical t values, significance levels p and data interpretation are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations (SD), One-tailed significance levels p, and data interpretation.

Survey statements	Means / SDs PS	Means / SDs SW	Computed t, critical t values	Significance level p, data interpretation
1 Mistakes are natural	3.89	3.91	t = 0.289	<i>p</i> < 0.05
	0.72	0.72	$t_{crit} = 1.684$	NSD
2 Immediate teacher's correction is preferable	3.72	3.43	t = 2.071	p < 0.025
	0.84	0.49	$t_{crit} = 2.021$	SD
3 Teacher's correction is generally effective	4.33	4.73	t = 2.52	<i>p</i> < 0.01
	0.68	0.69	$t_{crit} = 2.423$	SD
4 Hard to notice my own mistakes	3.35	3.32	t = 0.187	<i>p</i> < 0.05
	0.74	0.74	$t_{crit} = 1.684$	NSD
5 All mistakes in speaking must be corrected	2.91	3.57	t = 3.14	<i>p</i> < 0.01
	1.03	0.93	$t_{crit} = 2.704$	SD
6 All mistakes in writing must be corrected	4.41	4.32	t = 0.67	<i>p</i> < 0.05
	0.60	0.68	$t_{crit} = 1.684$	NSD
7 Teacher's correction of student's oral errors in front of the class undermines the learners' self-esteem	2.76 0.60	2.86 0.87	t = 0.67 $t_{crit} = 1.684$	<i>p</i> < 0.05 NSD
8 Teacher's individual correction of student's written mistakes is useful for learning ESP	4.30	4.25	t = 0.69	<i>p</i> < 0.05
	0.72	0.68	$t_{crit} = 1.684$	NSD
9 Peer feedback is beneficial	2.75	2.85	t = 0.625	<i>p</i> < 0.05
	0.65	0.85	$t_{crit} = 1.684$	NSD

The first column in Table 2 includes the survey statements. The second and the third columns display Mean values (the first line) and Standard Deviations (the second line). The fourth column in Table 2 shows computed t values for each statement and critical t values. Data interpretations based on the comparison of computed and critical t values are presented in the fifth column. If computed t values exceed critical t values, it means that there is a significant difference (SD) between PS and SW learners' responses. The level of significance p is found from Critical t Tables (Brown and Rodgers, 2002). The smaller the p value, the higher the probability P. If the significance level p is relatively high, i.e. p < 0.05 (P = 99.95%), it indicates that there is no significant difference (NSD) between the responses. In other words, the Means are statistically close. Therefore, according to the data in Table 2, we can conclude that there is no significant difference (NSD) in responses to the statements 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9, but there is a significant difference (SD) in responses to the statements 2, 3 and 5, in other words, here the Means are not statistically very close.

To sum up, there is no significant discrepancy between the responses of students of different specialization, except for the responses to the 3rd and the 5th statements. In other words, students' attitudes to feedback are basically the same. In spite of the small sample of the respondents in this study, the data of statistical processing ensure the right interpretation of the obtained results and allow extending their application beyond the sample.

5. Feedback

5.1. Teacher / Peer Feedback

Peer and teacher feedback can be very helpful both in oral and written work. Our experience has proved that teachers should not interrupt students' speech to point out their errors. Any intervention may raise stress levels and hinder communication. A good classroom practice is for teachers to keep recording students' mistakes during activities. Their mistakes should be dealt with later, after the activity has ended. It is also a good idea for teachers to focus on errors without indicating who made them and to ask students to rectify the errors afterwards. It should be emphasized that peer correction works well only in classes with a friendly and cooperative atmosphere. Otherwise remedial work may lead to undermining the learners' self-esteem and cause more damage than gain.

Another important observation in ESP classes is that feedback on written work depends on specific tasks. In our classes, we practiced either paper correction or electronic feedback. Paper correction includes teacher's responses to the written work submitted by the learner. This kind of feedback is individualized: the teacher codes or corrects mistakes, writes comments on content and errors. It is greatly appreciated by students who raise questions, ask for clarification and tend to rewrite their drafts.

5.2. Electronic Feedback

Electronic peer feedback has been employed for writing comments in peers' weblogs. All the learners have created their own weblogs which are used for written assignments and are incorporated in the teacher's website http://gkaval.home.mruni.lt under the title 'Studentų darbai' (*'Students' works'*) and may be viewed online. It should be noted that generally students avoid writing negative comments. As a rule, they try to find positive aspects in each case and usually praise peer's work. Unfortunetely, teachers' individual feedback, i.e. delivered face to face, has not always been followed by error correction: spelling and grammar errors online remain uncorrected, and students' common excuse for failing to do remedial work is the shortage of time. The learner's self-assessment of performance and reflections on learning were examined thoroughly in our previous article (Kavaliauskienė et al, 2007) and are omitted from the present article for the sake of brevity.

Current classroom practice offers some practical advice to teachers: evaluate students' writing and provide feedback individually avoiding airing any negative comments in front of the class or online. Similarly, it is better to provide feedback on observed speaking errors individually, for instance, during self-assessment interviews with each learner while discussing her/his success and achievements in language learning activities. The basic principle of teacher feedback is to keep in mind that it is designed to teach and help learning.

6. Implications

The main implications of our classroom research for language teachers are to monitor each student's performance in class activities closely, provide individual feedback on spoken and written errors, encourage self- and peer-correction, avoid negative feedback at all times, and provide a sandwich-type feedback (positive-negative-positive) individually. Such an approach might help to avoid undermining the learner and preserve his / her self-esteem, as individual reactions towards error correction may be very strong, and criticism may be felt as an emotionally threatening act. Finally, it is important to find out what learners' responses to teacher's feedback on their written work or spoken production are. All the things considered might help learners to be successful in improving language skills.

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been drawn from the analysis of the responses to error correction. First, students of social work and psychology believe that in order to improve writing skills it is necessary to receive teacher's feedback on written work both in paper and electronic form. Second, attitudes to feedback do not differ significantly, i.e. the specialization is not very relevant. Third, students prefer immediate correction of errors in spite of its impracticality and claim that individual correction of mistakes by teachers or peers is useful.

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GRĮŽTAMASIS RYŠYS UNIVERSITETO STUDIJOSE

Doc. dr. Galina Kavaliauskienė

Mykolo Romerio universitetas

Doc. dr. Irena Darginavičienė

Mykolo Romerio universitetas

Grįžtamasis ryšys yra stebėjimo rezultatų ir siūlymų teikimas suinteresuotiems asmenims vieni kitiems siekiant geriau atlikti asmenines bei organizacines užduotis. Grįžtamojo ryšio svarba mokant kalbų nėra vienareikšmiškai vertinama dėstytojų, o jo tyrimai nėra galutiniai. Dėstytojų ir studentų požiūriai į grįžtamąjį ryšį yra skirtingi. Dažniausiai dėstytojai neigiamai vertina grįžtamojo ryšio įtaką studentų motyvacijai ir pasitikėjimui savo žiniomis. Dėstytojo grįžtamasis ryšys taikomas, kai būtina taisyti rašybos arba kalbėjimo klaidas. Pastarųjų metų kalbų mokymosi teorijos teigia, kad ne visos klaidos taisytinos. Re-

miamasi teiginiu, kad klaidos mokantis neišvengiamos – tai yra, normalus reiškinys. Klaidų atsiradimo priežastys būna įvairios: gimtosios kalbos interferencija, ribotos užsienio kalbos žinios, kalbos sudėtingumas arba net fosilizacija pasiekus tam tikrą kompetencijos lygį. Straipsnyje nagrinėjami universiteto studentų požiūriai į grįžtamąjį ryšį mokantis specialybės anglų kalbos ir kaip keičiasi jų nuomonės mokantis specialybės kalbos. Gauti rezultatai rodo, kad grįžtamasis ryšys yra veiksmingas būdas skatinti lingvistinę plėtrą. Studentai labiausiai vertina rašto darbų klaidų taisymą, bet mažiau vertina pasisakymų kalbos klaidų taisymą. Priešingai negu dėstytojai, studentai mano, kad klaidas taisyti yra efektyvu ir tai nekenkia žmogaus savigarbai. Straipsnyje aptariamos dėstytojo grįžtamojo ryšio teikimo formos – popieriuje bei kurso draugų pastabos elektroninėje erdvėje. Pagrindinė šio tyrimo išvada skirta dėstytojams: stebėti kiekvieno studento pažangą ir geranoriškai taisyti rašto bei kalbėjimo klaidas. Dėstytojai privalo tobulinti savo klaidų taisymo metodikas taip, kad studentai nejaustų streso arba jaudulio.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: specialybės anglų kalba, grįžtamasis ryšys žodžiu ir raštu.