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What do you have to know about feedback to learn a language effectively?

Deelproject 'Met je mond vol Nederlands'

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What do you have to know about feedback to learn a language effectively?

Background

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007) feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning. Feedback seems to have a big impact on the development of language learning and according to Hattie and Timperley "this impact can be either positive or negative" (p.81). Hyland and Hyland (2006) mention that "feedback is widely seen in education as crucial for both encouraging and consolidating learning" (p.1). Hyland and Hyland state that providing feedback to students is one of the writing teacher's most important tasks since through feedback you can give individualized attention to language learners and in a class full of language learners this is not always possible.

> *"Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative"*
>
> (Hattie and Timperley (2007), p. 81).

Hattie and Timperley (2007) addressed three questions related to feedback:

1. Where am I going?

2. How am I going?

3. Where to next?

According to Hattie and Timperley, these questions work together, mentioning that "an ideal learning environment or experience occurs when both teachers and students seek answers to each of these questions" (p. 88). Sadler (1989) mentioned that the power of feedback is what leads to the development between how students perform at a certain moment and what they want to achieve next. Since feedback seems to have such a powerful influence on second language learning it is important to know the difference between good and bad feedback so that both teachers and students know how to give good feedback to language learners.

Introduction

Aim of the project

The aim of this project is to provide language learners with knowledge about feedback, to take control of their learning process and to learn the Dutch language more effectively. Feedback plays, as mentioned before, an important role in language learning and knowing more about how to give feedback effectively will lead to a better language learning process. It is important for language learners to recognize good and back feedback and, therefore, some examples of good and bad feedback will be given. Furthermore, this knowledge mobilization plan will give information about language learners' view on feedback, what kind of feedback they prefer and what they think is most effective when it comes to learning a language. Other language learners can learn from other language learners' view and experience with feedback.

Target audiences

This knowledge mobilization plan focusses on adult refugees learning Dutch who want to know more about feedback and the importance of it on second language learning. These language learners all attended ten language meetings where they received weekly feedback on their written assignments. The language meetings were organized by three students of the RUG to practice more Dutch with the language learners since they find it difficult to get in contact with Dutch people. Apart from the language meetings at the RUG, these language learners also attend Dutch classes at the Language Centre of the RUG and at Humanitas Groningen. Also in these classes, the language learners are exposed to feedback and, therefore, knowing more about feedback can help them in these language meetings. However, since all language learners are confronted with feedback, this knowledge mobilization plan could be of importance to any language learner that wants to know more about feedback.

Key message

The key message about feedback is that language learners should never take feedback personally. It may not always be nice to hear the things you did not do so good during a presentation or a writing assignment, however, it is good to keep in mind that the feedback given creates a possibility to improve yourself. Language learners should never hesitate to ask for feedback about their work. Without this feedback, improvement would not be so easy, simply because you would not know what you did wrong.

Feedback

The language learners

A group of six Syrian and one Iranian language learners, that have Dutch lessons at the Language Centre of the RUG and also attend language meetings at Humanitas Groningen, wanted to practice and speak more Dutch with native speakers. When Humanitas and De *Wetenschapswinkel Taal, Cultuur & Communicatie* were looking for students of the RUG who wanted to help the language learners by practicing more Dutch, three students were interested in this. Stephanie Berghuis, Kristy Kuik and Alies Post, all three MA Applied Linguistics students at the RUG, organized ten communicative language meetings for the language learners on different topics like politics, education, healthcare insurances and language.

The Approach

During their study, the three students learned about the Communicative Approach which focuses on the communication (content and language) rather than the traditional grammar-translation method. The Teaching English British Council Database describes the Communicative Approach as follows: "the communicative approach is based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning. When learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language" (Communicative Approach, 2012, paragraph 1). Apart from communication during the language meetings, every week the language learners wrote a short text on which they received written feedback.

Language learners' view on feedback:

During these communicative language meetings, the language learners filled out a feedback questionnaire. This questionnaire was to find out more about the language learners' view on feedback. The questionnaire gave some insight on how the language learners would like to receive feedback and what kind of feedback they thought is most effective for second language learning.

One of the questions the language learners answered to was how they prefer to receive feedback. They could choose from written feedback, oral feedback or both types of feedback. None of the students filled out that they preferred just oral feedback. They either preferred

just written feedback or both oral and written feedback. Bitchener and Storch (2016) mention that an advantage of written feedback is "that learners can refer to the feedback as often as they wish, whereas, in oral communication, the spoken utterance and any feedback received is fleeting and unable to be referred to again" (p. 4). This corresponds to what most of the students gave as the reason for their preference of written feedback. Hyland and Hyland (2006) mention that more studies showed that students value more written feedback than peer feedback and oral feedback.

Another question of the questionnaire the language learners answered to was which type of feedback the students think is most effective for language learning. Apart from one student who prefers an indirect-error correction, which focusses on locating the error so that the learner can try to correct the mistake, all of the students filled out that they find a direct-error correction with additional meta-linguistic information most effective and think that they learn more through this type of feedback. The direct error correction focusses on correcting the error and the meta-linguistic information can provide explanations, rules and examples of correct language usage (Bitchener and Storch, 2016).

"When I made a mistake I did not know why it was wrong. It is useful to know my mistakes, why something is wrong and what I can do to improve it and use it correctly. So I think this is best."

Language learner of Dutch about a direct-error correction with additional meta-linguistic information

What is good and what is bad feedback?

There are different ways of giving feedback and getting your message across to the language learner. As mentioned before, feedback has a powerful influence on learning and this impact can be either positive or negative (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Therefore, to make sure the feedback has a rather positive than negative impact on the language learning it is useful to know the difference between good and bad feedback.

Example 1: An English student who gave a presentation in Dutch and made some pronunciation mistakes.

Bad Feedback	*You made a lot of pronunciation mistakes, but the rest of the presentation went well.*

As can be seen in the example above, the feedback has a quite negative tone and is not very specific. Language learners always need to know what they did wrong in order to improve. However, only hearing negative comments can have a negative impact on the learner and might lead to a loss of confidence. Fishbach, Eyal and Finkelstein (2010) mention the outcomes of theories that "positive feedback increases people's confidence that they are able to pursue their goals, leading people to expect successful goal attainment. Negative feedback, in contrast, undermines people's confidence in their ability to pursue their goals and their expectations of success" (p.517).

There is a way to turn back feedback into good feedback. By using the 'sandwich model' you begin by providing some positive feedback, like commenting on specific strengths. Following the positive feedback, you can mention some points of improvement, so that the language learner is aware of them. Then you conclude with a positive comment. In this way, you don't only focus on the things that went wrong, but also keep the language learner more confident by giving them positive feedback on what went well.

Good feedback	*Your presentation was very good prepared. You did make some pronunciation mistakes, but if you keep practicing for sure it will go better next time.*

Example 2: A student who lately did not hand in the writing assignments for Spanish class.

Bad feedback	*You obviously don't care about the assignments for Spanish class!*

Even though the teacher is not too pleased with the fact that the student is not handing in the assignment, it is important to keep in mind for both giving and receiving feedback, that feedback focusses on the behavior of the language learner and not on the person. The feedback given above focusses obviously more on the person than on the behavior of that student and this might have a negative effect on the learner. There is another way of approaching the student, which is focusing completely on the student's behavior.

Good feedback	*Last 2 weeks you did not hand in the writing assignments for Spanish class. I am worried that you might not be able to catch up if you don't do the suggested assignments. Shall we meet up soon to talk about this?*

In the feedback given above, the teacher addresses the problem, while keeping focused on the behaviour. Teachers and language learners should know that feedback is not supposed to be personal, however, it should focus on the learner's behavior. Feedback should not lead to a loss of confidence, however, as Fishbach et al. (2010) conclude "feedback's main function is motivating goal pursuit" (p.528).

Activities and Products

1. Presentation on feedback

On June 15th a presentation was given to the group of Syrian and Iranian language learners. During this presentation, some of the results of the development of the writing performances were shown (see Appendix A). Furthermore, some information about feedback was given. During the presentation, the language learners received information about different forms of feedback and also some tips on how to deal with feedback themselves. The final tip they received was that they should not take feedback personally and that they should remember that the feedback given creates an opportunity to improve themselves.

2. 'Tips' & 'Tops'

At the end of the presentation, all of the language learners received a personal 'tip' and a 'top'. The tip is something they still have to improve on more, the top is something they are already good at.

3. Article for the Language Centre (RUG)

The Language Centre would like to have some information about informal language learning. The Language Centre would like to inform language learners about the different possibilities there are when it comes to learning a language without a teacher. A 150-200 words article will be written about how students can ask for effective feedback so that they continue learning the language on their own (see Appendix B).The article will be published on the portal of the Language Centre so that language learners can read this and make use of the different possibilities there are when it comes to learning a language independently.

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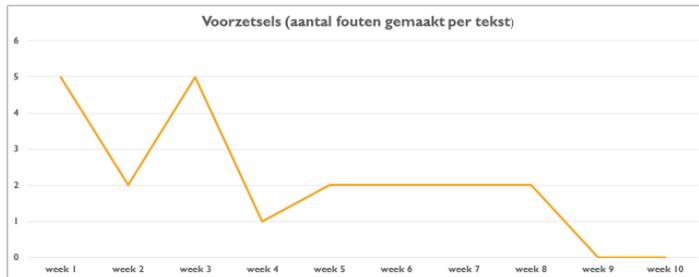
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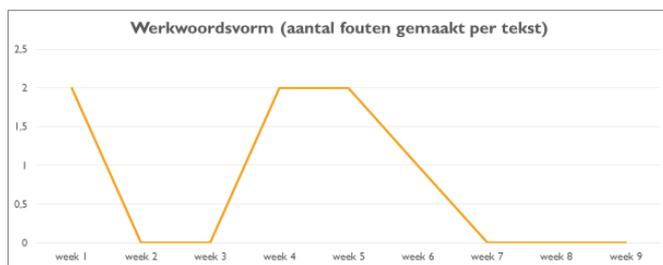Hyland, K. & Hyland, F. (2006). *Feedback in Second Language Writing.* Cambridge University Press.

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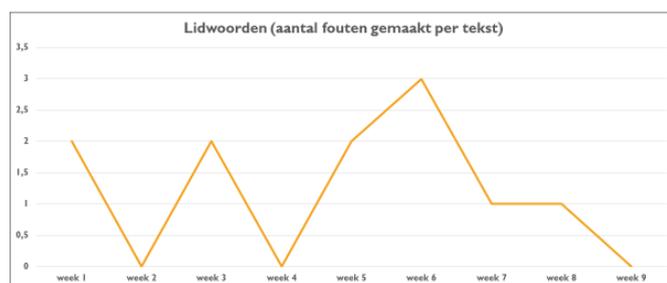# Appendix A: Slides used for presentation of June 15th

GRAFIEK 1: VOORZETSELS

Voorzetsels (aantal fouten gemaakt per tekst)

GRAFIEK 2: WERKWOORDEN

Werkwoordsvorm (aantal fouten gemaakt per tekst)

GRAFIEK 3: LIDWOORDEN

Lidwoorden (aantal fouten gemaakt per tekst)

Appendix B: Artikel Talencentrum (voorlopige versie)

Feedback heeft een grote invloed op het taalverwervingsproces en feedback vragen is niet altijd makkelijk. Door middel van feedback vragen kom je er achter wat je sterke punten zijn, maar ook kom je erachter aan welke punten je nog moet werken. Het kan eng zijn om naar je zwakke punten te vragen, maar onthoud dat feedback niet een persoonlijke aanval is. Het is enkel bedoeld om jezelf te kunnen verbeteren.

Tips feedback vragen:

- Vraag om **geschreven feedback.** Hierdoor kun je ook later de feedback nog doorlezen. Als je alleen mondelinge feedback krijgt is er een mogelijkheid dat je dingen vergeet.
- Vraag om een **tip en een top**. Hierdoor krijg je feedback over iets wat nog beter kan, maar ook iets wat je goed doet.
- Vraag hoe je je uiteindelijke **doel** kan **bereiken**. Het is belangrijk om te weten welke stappen je moet ondernemen om jezelf te verbeteren.