Tips from the Classroom:

Student-responsible correction of spoken English

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I was very interested to read Sandra Rothschild's article "Student-responsible error correction in academic writing" (*HEIS News*, January 2001) because the work she describes there on ESL writing skills has close parallels with an approach we have developed in our pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes programme at the University of Edinburgh. Like Sandra Rothschild, we are strongly in favour of finding ways of developing responsibility for learning in our students, but in our case we have been concentrating on the improvement of their spoken English, rather than their writing.

In working out techniques to help students review and revise their spoken output, it is important to make clear to them the difference between slips—mistakes that they are able to identify and correct, given the opportunity to do so—and errors—systematic mistakes reflecting their current competence in English, which they are therefore unable to correct without help. This crucial distinction lies at the heart of the teaching/learning process, with consequences for our respective roles in the classroom. We believe that learners have to take responsibility for slips; teachers (or peers) take responsibility for pointing out and explaining errors. The problem is, of course, that the teacher may not be able to tell which are slips and which are not, so the trick is to devise procedures in which learners get the chance to reflect on their speech and identify their slips, leaving the errors for correction by the teacher or another learner.

Over the past two summers we have devised and refined two techniques that involve the review of learners' speech, in order to help them 'notice the gap' between their spoken output and target performance. The first involves them transcribing and the second comprises the completion of a Speaking Log, drawn up on very similar lines to the writing and grammar logs that Sandra Rothschild described in her recent article.

Transcribing

For most of us, transcribing other people's words is not the most exciting of our professional tasks, but in a pilot study of transcribing with EAP student volunteers found that they perceived transcribing and reviewing their own speech to be both interesting and useful (Lynch 2001). Transcribing is now built into our EAP programme as a follow-up to classroom paired role play of an academic scenario. Each pair of students later listens to their classroom recording and chooses a section 90-120 seconds long that they would like to transcribe. They write it out verbatim (in conventional form), listening through headphones to a single cassette recorder, negotiating when to stop, rewind and replay the tape. They each produce a transcript and then agree on a final version (Transcript 1). Once agreed, Transcript 1 is word-processed, reviewed and edited until the learners are satisfied with the English; they are free to make any changes they want, including improvements as well as formal corrections. The outcome of this revision is Transcript 2.

They then give the teacher Transcript 2 (in hard copy and on floppy disk). The teacher reads it and reformulates it on disk, changing expressions that are incorrect or inappropriate, and prints it out as Transcript 3, which is then discussed with the two learners, who later record a further performance of the original scenario.

The students' response to Transcribing has been very positive, though end-of-course evaluations suggested that there was greater enthusiasm for it among learners with overall levels below TOEFL 550 (like the volunteers in the pilot study) than among the more advanced. It may

be that those with more limited English felt it gave them a bigger pay-off, in terms of slips they spotted and errors corrected by their partner or the tutor. So for summer 2000 we retained the transcribing activities in the first few weeks of the EAP programme, and then moved on to using a different noticing tool, the Speaking Log.

The Speaking Log

The Log is intended to encourage learners' selective attention in the process of noticing. Its design again reflects the slip / error distinction, but in a more explicit way than in Transcribing. Below is a schematic version of the Log:

Tape counter	Slips	Queries	Errors/Teacher's notes

It is designed for use with a recording of an oral summary or other monologue, rather than a paired task. The student listens to herself and focuses on points she wants to correct (which she notes in the *Slips* column) and words or expressions she is unsure about on second hearing (*Queries*). She fills in these two columns of the Log and then hands it in to the teacher, who takes away the Log and cassette, listens to the recording, and completes the fourth column by answering the student's queries and also noting down her errors. The teacher brings back the completed Log for the student to read and discuss at a class session, prior to a follow-up performance. (The Log can also be used by pairs working collaboratively, with a second learner reviewing the tape and adding to the *Errors* column).

The students on our summer 2000 programme worked on Transcribing in weeks 1-3 and Speaking Logs in weeks 4-9. At the end of week 9 we gave them a questionnaire about the two types of noticing they had been using. The question "If you had the chance, would you like to continue using the Logs in Course 4?" received a unanimous YES from the 34 respondents (out of 35 students). Sp there was little doubt that they found them useful.

The teachers' comments were more guarded. Some said it took up too much lesson preparation time to complete the Logs, since they had to listen to the whole of the recordings, in order to note down the additional errors that the student had not spotted. One commented on the wide variation in individuals' ability to notice, which she felt reduced the value of the Log.

To take the second point first, I agree that individuals differ in their noticing – but then they vary in all sorts of other ways, too, so the fact that some pick up more slips than others does not invalidate the activity completely; it merely brings out the natural differences among students. The first point - that the Logs consumed too much of the teachers' time – concerned me more, and we have been discussing ways of making the Logs more tutor-friendly for summer 2001. So far we have come up with two possibilities. One is to reverse the current arrangement: instead of students working on the Logs in class time, for the tutor to complete after class, the students could record themselves and complete their two sections of the Logs at home or in the self-access centre. They could then bring the cassette plus Logs for the tutor to listen to and comment on during class time, while the students work on other self-access tasks.

The second change is to reduce the length of the students' recordings. One principled way of doing that would be for the students to record themselves doing a "4-3-2" task. (This involves recording themselves speaking for 4 minutes – for example, summarising an article they have just read – then listening to review their recording. They then record themselves for 3 minutes to summarise the same content, listen again and review their summary. Finally they make a 2-minute recording of a still more condensed version of the summary). From a psycholinguistic point of view, "4-3-2" has the advantage of giving the student the chance to rehearse and review

twice, before they record the 2-minute version, which should then represent an 'optimal' performance of their spoken English. Logistically, these shorter recordings should also allow the teacher to give feedback and correction to <u>all</u> the students in a class during a single 90-minute lesson, which was not feasible with the longer recordings last summer.

Conclusion

Our experience of using Transcribing and Speaking Logs has been very positive. They provide an opportunity for students to 'capture' and analyse their own speech, which under normal circumstances is fleeting and hard to recall. They get the chance to review their spoken output and to self-correct <u>before</u> getting feedback in the form of peer- or tutor-correction. It is gratifying that the two techniques both mesh with current views of researchers into 'focus on form' and are also popular with our students. Finding that colleagues in TESOL HEIS have found similar success in enhancing students' responsibility for correction in the teaching of writing skills has boosted our enthusiasm to develop these speech noticing techniques further.

Reference

Lynch, T. (April 2001). Seeing what they meant: Transcribing as a route to noticing. *ELT Journal* 55/2.