Teaching students how to correct each other’s mistakes

What this research was about and why it is important
In today’s world language classrooms, teachers often rely on partner and group speaking activities (peer interaction), but previous research has shown that students rarely correct each other’s mistakes during these activities, and it is unclear what effects peer interaction has on language development. In this study, some students engaged in peer interaction while others did not. Of the students who interacted with peers, some were trained to correct each other’s mistakes and others were not. The study showed that only students who engaged in peer interaction became more fluent. Additionally, only students who were trained to correct their peers’ mistakes during peer interaction improved in terms of grammatical accuracy.

What the researchers did
- 167 students of English at a university in Japan participated in the study.
- They had been learning English for many years with grammar-translation methods. As a result, they knew English grammar rules but had trouble applying them when speaking.
- Learners were split into 4 groups: Two groups engaged in peer interaction and were taught to correct other learners’ mistakes, and one group engaged in peer interaction but was not taught to correct other learners’ mistakes. Finally, one group (the control group) did not engage with peers at all.
- Over a period of 10 weeks, learners in the first two groups were instructed to correct their peers during peer interaction activities, with a focus on one grammatical structure per week (e.g., past tense). The grammatical structures were not new to the learners, but they had trouble using these structures correctly and fluently when speaking.
- At the beginning and at the end of the semester, learners completed a picture-based speaking test. The researchers measured whether the learners in the different groups had become more fluent and whether they were speaking more accurately.

What the researchers found
- All learners except for the learners in the control group improved in terms of fluency (i.e., they used more syllables per minute).
- Only the learners who were taught to correct their peers improved in terms of accuracy (i.e., they made fewer grammatical mistakes).
- The learners in the control group did not improve at all.

Things to consider
- These results suggest that peer interaction is a useful pedagogical tool for fluency development.
- However, peer interaction alone is unlikely to lead to gains in terms of accuracy. To maximize the benefits of peer interaction, a good option for teachers is to encourage and train students to correct other learners during peer interaction.
- Some teachers are concerned that corrections hinder fluency development. However, the study showed that peer corrections do not impede fluency development, as learners who were taught to correct peers’ mistakes improved both in terms of accuracy and fluency.
- The study shows that peer corrections may work particularly well for grammatical structures that students have already learned in theory but not yet mastered when speaking. The study did not investigate whether peer corrections work for newly learned grammatical structures.

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