

Interview Transcript

[Asking the Right Questions: Research *in* and *for* the Classroom](#)

TESOL Blog, November 13, 2021

Speaking is Alina Lemak, who has been a teacher in adult ESL programs for several years.

Total Running Time 8:05

- 0:00 My research area is looking at individual differences in oral corrective feedback. And the actual idea, and the topic of it, even though it was a bit of an evolution — a combination of my experience as a Master’s student and the research that I was exposed to, as I was attending those classes —
- 0:22 The actual evolution of my research question, which was looking specifically at the impact of personality on how students respond to and also benefit from oral corrective feedback, actually, can be traced back to a very specific instance in my teaching career. Very early on as a teacher,
- 0:52 —there was this moment in the classroom, and I even have this flashbulb memory of it. I can still see it: Everything that happened in that moment. That at the time, really made me pause, and in some ways, feel inadequate as a teacher. But later, like I said, when I was exposed to the literature on this topic and was able to put into context my experience with the existing theory on this, it really made me want to research more on this, and really made me want to understand the phenomenon much more – and really where my research question came from.
- 1:43 Just to put it into context, in my teacher preparation program, the idea of corrective feedback, in particular oral corrective feedback, was really, I feel like, rushed through. I mean, we were exposed to like a really old Krashen article and the main takeaway point at the end of this program, that I, and I feel like everybody else got, was that oral corrective feedback—the most important buzzwords that you should use when you do the interview and somebody asks about your teaching philosophy on that—is you should say, ‘only when the error really interferes with meaning and never over-correct’.
- 2:39 So as a novice teacher, I learned that, you know. I said that at the interview, and I remember the interviewer was like nodding along, checkmark, well-done you know, did the right thing, and I’m like whew! So that was the kind of mindset I went in: so as little as possible, only when there’s a major communication breakdown, and never over-correct. That fear I always had in my mind that I could possibly, you know, make this an uncomfortable environment for students and cause somebody distress with my correction, so that was always at the back of my mind.

- 3:21 On the other hand I was starting to get these students' feedback reviews at the end of each month that we had a class. And I noticed that, I mean my scores were good overall—I'm not saying there were strong complaints there—but my scores were always the lowest on, you know, 'corrects my errors'. So I thought ok, so — whatever that means, you know? I was always wondering, like, ok so I'm obviously doing something that the students want more of or want me to do it differently.
- 3:57 And at the same time, in this particular class, there was a particular student, I remember she came up to me after class and said, 'Why don't you correct all my errors?' And I said well, immediately I said, you know, I do correct occasionally when there's a breakdown in communication. And I explained my policy – I always try to explain my policy because these were adult ESL students. So I said, you know, when it interferes with comprehension, but I want to make sure that I don't correct too much because-, and I focus only on one specific thing because I don't want to interrupt you every time you speak. And she said, 'No, no, no please, I want you to correct every error I make'. Alright, I thought.
- 4:46 And at the next few opportunities I had – it was during like a class discussion where each student would take a turn to talk. I would try to do that. Obviously not every error, but I would try to provide more corrective feedback. And I didn't really know the distinction about the different corrective feedback techniques, at least in terms of terminology, but you know, I was using recasts, I would say, at the time.
- 5:21 So I remember she was sitting right on this side, and I was going right around. So I'm going, going, each student, you know, I correct them, they, ok, they keep going, they finish their talk, and I get to this part of the class, like almost halfway through it, there's this girl that sits there. I would say she was quite introverted, reserved, but she would speak when called upon, and I was always mindful that I didn't want to, you know, push her too much because I didn't want to take her out of her comfort zone and I wanted her to enjoy the class as well. And she starts speaking and I suddenly, I do my recast and—
- 6:11 —Shuts down. Completely. Shuts down and just looks at me, you know, with open eyes like she was a bit in shock. And I was in shock. And I'm standing there, I feel like I did something wrong. The fact that I still have this flashbulb memory of it shows that it really had an impact on me because I thought, you know, you kind of did the worst thing you can do, you've stopped her from talking even though generally this was the student I really wanted to encourage in terms of speaking. And you've shut her down, and you know you, did all the bad things you weren't supposed to do as a teacher.

6:50 And at the same time, I was trying to understand what happened, right? And I felt, ok this student really, really enjoyed what I was doing, the corrective feedback. The other student was not bothered by it. The other student seemed to accept it. It's only this particular student that this happened with. So how do I give the people that really want all that feedback, the feedback that they want? But at the same time understand why—, what went wrong in that particular situation, and how to make sure, you know, that it doesn't happen again.

7:32 I did consider the cultural, contextual explanation. But no. I kept looking at, you know, people from other cultures. Didn't respond the same way. In a similar contextual situation as the students were, I thought, ok there's something different. There's an individual difference that's emerging here. So I didn't completely give up on corrective feedback after this, but I was even more cautious.

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