Episode 185 Transcript

Tue, Oct 03, 2023 4:51PM 10:18

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

students, errors, prompts, instruction, answer, wrong, learning, classroom, correct answer, episode, podcast, written, teaching, reinforcer, reinforcement, distractor, skill, present, free, happen

SPEAKERS

Chris

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom, to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Chris Reeve. I'm your host, and we are doing a series of bite sized episodes on the critical elements of instruction.

I talked back in episode 180, about the overall elements of instruction. And now I'm diving deeper into each one of those. We've talked about teaching targets, setting out the steps of instruction, creating the materials, and giving instructions effectively.

And today's step is to talk about what do we do about errors. I'll be talking about how we decide when to use errorless materials, or correct errors and how prompting fits into all of this. And I'm going to do my best to get it done in 10 minutes or less. So let's get started.

One of the things that's nice and kind of interesting about working at a school specifically for learners with autism, that uses all the different strategies I talk about in this podcast, is that you get to have discussions that the research geek in me thinks are incredibly interesting, but no one outside of work would even understand what I'm talking about.

One of those academic discussions was on how we dealt with errors in our instruction. It's easy in a large organization, or even sometimes within a classroom, to have a set procedure and train everyone on it with one option. But when you work with students with autism, or really any kind of

special need, that doesn't always work, because each of our students is so different in the way that they learn. So I find it's often easy to have a default position that you start with, and then make adjustments based on the student's performance.

And just to give you an overview of the end of that story, we used to have discussions about whether or not we should only use errorless learning where we prevent errors from happening. And of course, that worked for some of our students. But some of our students needed a different strategy. And so this was an ongoing debate that we had, because there kind of was a rule to only use errorless learning, but there are some drawbacks to that.

So one of the drawbacks is that it can lead to longer times for students to master skills, and sometimes students become a little bit dependent on it, if we don't do a good job of fading the errorless learning out. So we have to factor all that into the equation as well.

So what are our choices when we think about errors? The first is to teach in a way that is almost errorless. It's often called errorless teaching. It's kind of a misnomer, because students can still make errors using this, but you're setting up the teaching so that the error is much less likely to happen.

An example of errorless teaching would be if I'm teaching a math fact, like three plus three, and I have it written on a paper, and I want them to write the answer, and I have the answer written in a dotted line in the answer spot. It's likely that the student will just trace over the answer and get reinforced, at the beginning, for getting the answer correct.

Over time, I would fade those dotted lines, so the student is writing the correct answer independently. And then I would also need to make sure that we're using different ways to present that same equation, so that they generalize their ability to answer three plus three side by side instead of vertical and things like that.

This is a type of stimulus prompting, and I've written a blog post about it and I'll put a link to it in the show notes if you're interested in that. The key is to set your instruction up from the start, so that the student is likely to get the right answer. Getting the right answer allows him to access the reinforcer. And if our reinforcer is really reinforcing the skill, the correct answer to that particular instruction should increase. In other words, the student learns. There are a number of ways to set this up beside this one example. And I'll link to a blog post about that as well.

The other way to handle errors is just to allow them to happen. And then there are two ways that you can respond to them. Which of these that you want to use is going to depend on your student's behavior and their learning rate.

First, you can do what seems to come naturally, which is to tell them that the answer is wrong. Typically, if I choose this route, I would tell them the right answer. I would present a quick distractor task so that they're not like just repeating back what I've said, and then come back to that same question to see if they can get it right the next time since I prompted them in that first one, I corrected them and the first one, so I asked, what's three plus three? They said eight. I said, nope, it's six, and touch your head. What is your first name? What is three plus three? So I've given them a couple of distractors in between.

All of this can take place in real time if you're working with the student directly in presenting information, or it could happen when you're grading their paper. So in that case, you would integrate the ones they made errors on into more practice with you or in other activities.

If you use the strategy, I would probably just tell them the right answer and move on to something else. Sometimes it's tempting to tell them it's wrong, and have them either guess or continue to make choices if it's something where they can choose answers, like a task card with multiple choices.

The problem is that first, if you have a set number of options to choose from, eventually, they will we'll eliminate all of them by getting wrong and end up with the right answer because it's the only one left. Some of our students will learn just to choose things until they get to the right one. And that's not what we want their learning to be. That's not the same as learning the skill. And it's likely to end up giving us unreliable performance in the future because they haven't really mastered it.

Now, some students are going to have a really difficult time if you tell them that their answer is wrong. For some, they might just shut down and refuse to respond. This happens often with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, often because they presume that they are always going to get the answer wrong. Other students when told that their answer is wrong, may it upset, they may get frustrated, they might tear up their paper or get aggressive. For either of those students, I would avoid telling them that something is wrong.

When I don't correct the student, I typically either just move them on to the next item with no praise and no reinforcement. If we were working with material that was specific to this answer, like a task card or something like that, I would just pick it up, don't say anything and move on to the next thing.

It's important to remember with error correction, and with prompting that it's the reinforcement for getting the right answer that actually does the teaching. It's less about what we tell them and more about the consequences of what they do. Our job is to organize the teaching session, and the trial and error to get to the reinforcement when it is the correct answer or response. We use prompts to get to the right answer.

So students get reinforced for the right answer to the right problem. We have to fade the prompts out eventually, of course, so that students are independent. But we don't have to give corrections to

eventually, of course, so that students are independent. But we don't have to give corrections to someone for them to know that they got the wrong answer. We might need to show them that the answer is wrong like when we grade an assignment.

But we should also be presenting a lot more opportunities to practice the skill and get to the right answer rather than thinking that just getting a wrong answer, say on a test or worksheet or in our instruction, and being told it's wrong is going to correct that error. Our students are not great problem solvers so they often don't make that connection. Telling a student something is wrong tells them it's not right, but it doesn't tell them what to do instead.

So those are some of the things to think about with error correction. The way we use prompts depends on how we're going to prevent or handle errors. And I will link to a blog post that I just updated that has an infographic you can download with prompts and information about different prompts as well.

Your action item this week is to think about the approach you take to student errors in instruction. But then take it one step further. Does everyone in the classroom staff know how to handle errors effectively during instruction? And if not, then it might be useful to write down some guidelines to share with them so you can get more consistency.

Thank you so much for tuning into this episode. Next week, I'll be back to talk about reinforcement. Because after all, if we get our error procedures down pat, but we aren't using effective reinforcers our learning it's really going to happen very well.

If you found this episode helpful, I would love it if you would share it with a friend or colleague or hop over to Apple podcasts and leave a review of the podcast itself. I always love to hear from listeners with their thoughts about episodes as well, so always feel free to DM me on Instagram @autismclassroomresources. Have an amazing week.

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