

Correcting oral errors

Meng Tian focuses on effective feedback.

Communicative language teaching has convinced teachers that in order to get English language learners communicating well in the target language, interaction activities must be incorporated into lessons so that they can practise speaking with their peers and with the teacher. However, whilst communicating in one's mother tongue is natural, communicating in another language is very demanding, especially for low-level learners. The communication process requires accuracy and fluency in the target language, while the planning and editing time is very limited and some necessary language components are likely still to be unfamiliar or even unknown. Therefore, it is inevitable that learners will make errors during the learning process.

Although errors indicate that the learners' grasp of English is imperfect, there are positive aspects to be considered. On the one hand, the learners are taking part in a challenging interaction, trying to express themselves in another language. They are experimenting with what they have learnt. If they are given appropriate feedback, they will gradually come to know the difference between correct and incorrect language. On the other hand, by noticing and correcting the students' errors, teachers can get an idea of what needs to be focused on in future lessons: errors can reveal how much new language has been absorbed and how much further practice is needed.

Factors

There are many issues which need careful consideration, including the teacher's and learners' roles in error correction, what errors to correct and how to correct them. In addition, the learners' level and attitudes need to be taken into consideration. Error correction can, therefore, be very complicated since all these factors will influence its efficacy. Decisions about how to react to the learners' performance should be based on the following factors:

1 Error categories

Distinguishing between different types of errors can help teachers decide which errors can be self-corrected or peer-corrected and which need to be teacher-corrected. Some errors can be self-corrected by the learners completely unprompted or with the guidance of the teacher or other learners. Some, however, are produced regularly and systematically and can be much more deeply ingrained. The learners might not know what the correct form should be – or may know what the correct form *should* be, but are not able to *produce* it for themselves.

2 Interaction aims

In terms of the aim of interaction, a distinction is often made between non-communicative and communicative activities. As Jeremy Harmer explains, the former are generally intended to ensure accuracy, while the latter are designed to improve language fluency. In other words, non-communicative

activities, sometimes called 'controlled practice activities' are designed to encourage correct production of newly presented language or to correct errors later on, while the goal of communicative activities is to get the learners to use new language in more natural communication. This distinction helps teachers decide the extent to which errors should be corrected. In non-communicative activities, teachers should focus on accuracy and try to

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correct the learners' errors immediately. With communicative activities, it is better for teachers to avoid over-correction and focus the learners' attention on the communication of ideas rather than specific grammar points or vocabulary usage.

But *when* should teachers correct errors? The options include: immediately; after a few minutes; at the end of the activity; later in the lesson; at the end of lesson; in the next lesson; later in the course; never. If the objective is

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accuracy, then immediate correction is more likely to be useful; if the aim is fluency, then immediate correction is less appropriate and any correction will probably come after the activity has finished or later. Interrupting to correct the learners can kill an activity.

Roles

Recognising different teacher and learner roles in error correction can foster positive attitudes towards correction, involve the learners in the learning process and reduce their dependence on the teacher.

Giving the learners the chance to self-correct is helpful in establishing an atmosphere conducive to learning. The learners will learn how to monitor themselves and become more accurate and autonomous. Sometimes they will need some assistance from the teacher to identify *where* the errors are and *what kind* of errors they are before they can self-correct.

Peer-correction is useful, too, but must be handled carefully. Pairs or group members should change frequently to avoid giving the better learners a sense of self-satisfaction and the lower-level learners a feeling of inferiority.

If errors are too difficult for self-correction or peer-correction, the teacher should stop and explain the right form to the whole class. The learners should then practise the correct version. Teachers should also identify any common errors that their learners make and use these to plan subsequent lessons.

Stages

Correction is usually made up of four distinct stages. Whether to follow the stages strictly or not will depend on the level of the learners.

Firstly, the teacher should show that something is not accurate by a gesture or (not-too-discouraging) word.

Secondly, the teacher should let the learner know where the error is. They

can do this by isolating the part of the utterance that is wrong. So, if a learner says *'My sister come yesterday'* but means *'My sister came yesterday'*, then just telling him to try again might be of no use.

Thirdly, the learner needs to know what kind of error it is (eg grammatical or phonological). In the example above, the learner needs to know that the mistake is in the verb *come*. If he still can't correct the error after the teacher tells him that the word *come* is incorrect, the teacher will need to give a further hint or supply the correct word.

Lastly, to make everything clear, the teacher should repeat the correct version, even when the learners can correct themselves. This helps the learners to consolidate what they have learnt.

Recording errors

In controlled practice activities, correction is usually done during the activity. However, in freer speaking activities, for example roleplays or discussions, it is better not to interrupt. As it is not easy to recall learners' errors after the activity has finished, many teachers watch and listen while speaking activities are taking place but at the same time take notes of any common errors in grammar, pronunciation, etc. They also note down things that go well and times when learners couldn't make themselves understood. After the activity has finished, they ask the learners how they think it went, before giving their own feedback.

If there is recording equipment, teachers can video activities and use parts of the recording with the learners to examine any errors. This can be time-consuming, but it is usually appreciated by the learners.

Techniques for correction

Jeremy Harmer describes a number of efficient ways to give correction:

Repeating

The teacher asks the learner to repeat what they said by saying *'Again?'* or *'Pardon?'* using intonation or facial expression to indicate that some part of what they said is wrong.

Echoing

The teacher repeats what the learner has said, stressing the part that is incorrect.

Statement and question

The teacher simply points out that there was an error and asks a question like *'How can we make that sentence right?'* or *'What's wrong with that sentence?'* to involve learners in the correction process.

Expression

When the teacher knows the learners well, a simple facial expression, such as a frown, coupled with a gesture, can show something is not correct.

Metalinguage

Teachers can use linguistic terms (*countable nouns, word order, etc*) to let the learners know what errors they have made and get them to think about how to correct them.

Reformulation

In two cases, the teacher may need to rework the learner's utterance. One case is when there are several errors needing correction, and it may be beyond the learner's ability to self-correct. The other is when the teacher feels it is necessary to help the learner produce a more natural and appropriate utterance. As Andrew Cohen points out, it isn't enough for teachers just to focus on correcting the wrong use of basic vocabulary, grammatical forms and pronunciation. Such evaluation is only partial as it focuses on 'low-level' accuracy, but ignores 'higher-level' factors, such as appropriate word choice and native-like organisation.

Oral errors are usually picked up on when only one learner is speaking, so correction often has to be done on an individual basis. However, teachers should avoid slowing down the pace of the lesson and letting the other learners get bored. To reduce the likelihood of this, they should involve the whole class as much as possible in the correction process and spend less time correcting something that is only a problem for one learner and more time on problems common to the whole class.

Issues

Teachers can become worried and impatient when learners cannot use new language perfectly. So it is essential for them to have a clear understanding of the nature of errors. Errors are the learners' way of testing their hypothesis about the nature of the language they are learning and, as a result, should be viewed with openness and acceptance,

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especially during the early stages of language learning. As Stephen Krashen points out, errors are inevitable and will be plentiful as learners learn and experiment in using new language. In short, errors are an important part of learning and the feedback teachers give plays a vital role in this process.

The learners' response to correction should be taken into consideration, too. Error correction touches not only the cognitive skills, but also the affective aspects of language learning, which include feelings and attitudes. Teachers must, therefore, be careful to avoid causing negative reactions when they correct. Learners who lack confidence in their language ability may become discouraged, especially when correction is given without explanation and they don't know what to do with the feedback given by the teacher. Moreover, comments like *'I don't understand what you are saying'* can damage the learners' self-esteem.

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Implementation

The effectiveness of any error correction depends on its implementation. Both teachers and learners have to try to replace negative reactions with a positive outlook. Teachers can help by explaining to the learners the purpose of correction and the techniques they will use. This explanation can include the fact that the amount and timing of the correction will depend on whether the emphasis of an activity is on accuracy or fluency, to what extent they intend to correct errors, how they are going to provide feedback and how the learners can help each other in error correction. This will help to create positive attitudes towards error correction and a supportive atmosphere in class.

Positive feedback, acknowledging the learners' progress, should always be given alongside any correction. This will contribute to the learners' motivation and their willingness to improve. Negative comments such as *'That's*

wrong! Why didn't you do enough practice?' will discourage the learners. It is better to use comments like *'That isn't clear; perhaps you would like to revise it. What do you think?'* and praise, such as *'Good job'* or *'You're making progress'* will boost their confidence and morale. It is not hard to find areas of improvement in learners' work. For example, successful communication, accurate use of grammar points recently learnt, use of new vocabulary, good pronunciation, and so on. The use of positive comments will neutralise any negative emotions created by correction.

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Strategies

Teachers should be equipped with enough knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary, and so on of the target language to enable them to provide good lessons without misleading the learners and causing 'teacher-induced' errors. While preparing lesson plans, teachers should familiarise themselves with all aspects of an item of language they are focusing on. The more they know about the language they are going to teach, the less likely they are to make mistakes.


At the same time, teachers should identify the typical grammatical, lexical and pronunciation problems associated with the nationality of the learners. This will help them predict the sort of errors the learners may make and enable them to cope with them more easily. Language transfer has long been seen to be a source of learning difficulties and errors. Contrastive analysis of languages indicates that dissimilarities between the native and the target language may cause confusion leading to errors (negative L1 transfer) instead of facilitating the process of second language learning (positive L1 transfer). Thus, when teaching particular structures which cause L1 interference and when doing correction, it can be

useful for teachers to remind the learners of any linguistic differences between English and their native language. Michael Swan and Bernard Smith have produced a useful analysis and categorisation of common errors made by learners of English from different countries.

Encouraging the learners to keep an error correction notebook (with notes of any errors made and their corrections) can be a helpful strategy. This will help the learners to monitor their errors and provides a useful revision tool and a way of encouraging them to be more independent.

If necessary, teachers should give remedial sessions highlighting any recurring errors in order to develop the learners' awareness of common errors. This is a face-saving technique, as individual learners will not be in the spotlight and those who recognise their own errors in those that are highlighted will be consoled by the knowledge that they are not alone in making them. Just make sure that no names are mentioned when highlighting the errors!



We must all bear in mind that the aim of correction is to bring about self-awareness and improvement, and when giving correction teachers should not forget to give positive feedback on the learners' work. If this is not done as a matter of routine, it can be hard to maintain a positive and cooperative working atmosphere. 

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