

5.5 Managing error

BACKGROUND

If teachers corrected every language error made in their class, far too much classroom time would be given over to correction. This has negative implications in that it might reduce learner willingness to take risks and experiment.

Teachers necessarily differentiate between errors that require immediate attention and errors that are better ignored or treated in another way or at another time. This is one of the many choices a teacher makes in regard to learner error.

TASK OBJECTIVE

This observation task is designed to help you become more aware of the issues involved in error management. You will be attending to learner error, noting down some examples, watching for how the teacher responds and noting whether correction is given and how.

PROCEDURE

BEFORE THE LESSON

1. Arrange to see a lower-level lesson, preferably one with an oral/aural objective.
2. Make yourself familiar with the chart overleaf.

DURING THE LESSON

Use the chart to help you record some instances of learner error and teacher response. Try to capture about eight such instances.

1. Script the instance of learner error; this might be inaccurate or inappropriate language.
2. Note whether the teacher responded and if so, a brief note as to what was said or signalled.
3. Note down where roughly in the lesson it occurred. This is a prompt to help you recall it later.
4. Note whether there was a particular focus at that point of the lesson, for example, on accuracy or fluency.

Learner error	Teacher response	Lesson phase	A/F

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AFTER THE LESSON

1. Did you observe any pattern in the teacher's way of responding to learner error? Discuss with the teacher their rationale for managing error.
2. Looking over the eight instances you collected, is it possible to *distinguish* among them, or perhaps *rank* them in order of importance? Which were very important to correct and which perhaps might have been overlooked?
3. How did *other students* respond to a student's error and (where relevant) to the teacher's response? Was there any peer correction, or peer interaction or discussion of the error? If so, what did the teacher say or do to encourage this?
4. Were there any opportunities for the students to *self-correct*? If so, do you recall anything the teacher said or did to encourage self-correction?
5. Was there a link between the *amount* of error correction and the *focus* of the phase of the lesson?
6. When the focus of the lesson is on *fluency* there may be ways in which a teacher can avoid interrupting the flow of the students' language. Is error correction necessary at such times in a lesson? Is it possible to correct in a non-obtrusive way?
7. Was there any evidence in the lesson of students' *processing information*? For example, in committing an error, having it pointed out,

hearing the correct version and trying it out, a learner might simply be echoing what they think is required of them, or they might be *processing*, that is, adjusting existing notions or hypotheses about language to accommodate newly received information.

8. Focus on *the teacher's language* in response to an error. Were there any occasions when the teacher responded to the error without attending to *the student's intended meaning*, that is, attended exclusively to the form of the language?
What effect did this have: on the student? on other students? on the lesson?

REFLECTION

What experience do you have of being corrected when speaking a second or foreign language? Do you think this has influenced your teaching?

Much, if not all, of what a teacher says and does in the classroom is a *reflection* of that teacher's belief (conscious or otherwise) about how people learn languages. Considering your own style of managing error, how does this reflect your underlying beliefs?

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