

ERROR CORRECTION

INTRODUCTION

Error correction can be broadly defined as strategies used by the teacher or a more 'knowledgeable other' to point out and attempt to **repair** a learner's incorrect production, i.e. a spoken or written production that does not conform to accepted norms of language usage. It is an area of teaching generally related to classroom management and associated to feedback, i.e. information about performance. Error correction is also often called **corrective feedback**.

Error correction in second language teaching and learning is a topic that has sparked considerable **debate** and views are generally split between those who assert that correction can be **counterproductive** and hinder the learning process, and those who affirm that correction is **necessary** for learning to take place. However, well-suited and well-timed correction has been observed to have positive **effects**, at least in the long term. It is also an aspect of learning that teachers use as an indicator of **progress** and that learners usually **expect**.

It is important to understand that not all errors are the same. Theoretically, the following distinction can be made.

- **Errors:** inaccuracies caused by lack of knowledge (i.e. linguistic **competence**) and that learners wouldn't be able to correct themselves.
- **Mistakes:** inaccuracies caused by distraction, pressure, etc. (i.e. linguistic **performance**) that learners would be able to correct themselves once pointed out. These can also be called '**slips**'.

In this handout, the two terms will be used interchangeably as, in practice, it is often difficult to distinguish an error from a mistake, at least unless we know a learner very well or until the learner is given a chance to self-correct.

Another distinction is made in relation to their impact on **comprehension**.

- **Global errors:** inaccuracies which impede understanding (e.g. I have be no English class).
- **Local errors:** inaccuracies which do not hamper communication (e.g. She like study English).

A final difference exists between the **sources** of errors.

- **Interlingual errors:** inaccuracies caused by L1 interference (i.e. the learner's first language).
- **Intralingual errors:** inaccuracies caused by developmental effects.

SOURCES OF ERRORS

The following is a comprehensive categorization of the sources of learner errors.

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| ▪ Interference | Using elements from one language to produce another. <i>E.g. I bought a new book at the <u>library</u>.</i> |
| ▪ Overgeneralization | Constructing unknown forms according to patterns of known forms. <i>E.g. She <u>buyed</u> a new house.</i> |
| ▪ Ignorance | Applying rules to contexts where they are not applicable. <i>E.g. We discussed <u>about</u> the problem.</i> |
| ▪ Incompleteness | Constructing incomplete forms. <i>E.g. Where <u>you come from</u>?</i> |
| ▪ False hypotheses | Constructing forms according to wrong assumptions about the TL. <i>E.g. He <u>was go</u> on holiday.</i> |
| ▪ Hypercorrection | Replacing a correct form in an attempt to sound more formal/correct. <i>E.g. Between you and <u>I</u>...</i> |
| ▪ Simplification | Producing simplified versions of correct forms. <i>E.g. You <u>went where</u>?</i> |
| ▪ Avoidance | Avoiding a particular form because perceived as too difficult. <i>E.g. How long <u>are you living</u> here?</i> |
| ▪ Incorrect instruction | Producing incorrect forms because of incorrect input from teachers, classmates, materials, etc. |
| ▪ Fossilization/
Stabilization | Producing incorrect forms which have become part of the learner's 'interlanguage', i.e. the unique grammatical system developed by the learner in the process of language acquisition. This system is in constant evolution. When it stops, the learner keeps on making the same errors. |

Despite this list, errors may be more generally categorized as '**interference errors**' (i.e. *interlingual*) and '**developmental errors**' (i.e. *intralingual*). A common **assumption** in the past was that errors were mainly caused by **negative transfer** from the learner's L1. More recently, it was observed that many errors are actually the result of **development** and that all learners, regardless of their L1, go through similar stages of **development** and make errors that follow similar patterns.

TYPES OF ERRORS

Learners can make **grammar** or **vocabulary** errors in areas related to meaning, form, pronunciation and/or appropriacy (i.e. whether the language used is socially and culturally appropriate for a particular context).

The following are some examples with a brief evaluation.

ERROR	TYPE	ASPECT	EVALUATION
<u>I've visited</u> Japan last year.	GRAMMAR	MEANING	The learner used an incorrect tense to express a completed action in the past. The Present Perfect Simple is formed correctly but it expresses a different meaning.
I have dinner <u>always</u> at 8pm.	GRAMMAR	FORM	The learner formed the sentence using an incorrect word order. Meaning is not impacted.
<u>A coffee is wanted by me.</u>	GRAMMAR	APPROPRIACY	The learner used a grammatically correct structure (i.e. passive) in a context where it is not needed and where it would sound inappropriate.
She's <u>embarrassed</u> with a third child.	VOCABULARY	MEANING	The learner used a word from L1 (Spanish <i>embarasada</i>) to express the meaning of another word (English <i>pregnant</i>). Meaning is compromised.
She invested <u>on</u> the property market.	VOCABULARY	FORM	The learner used the wrong preposition to form the collocation 'invest in'. Meaning is not impacted.
I don't really like <u>vegeTAbles.</u>	VOCABULARY	PRONUNCIATION	The learner placed the stress on the wrong syllable and pronounced the word 'vegetables' incorrectly. Meaning is not impacted.
[In a restaurant]: <u>Gimme</u> this!	VOCABULARY	APPROPRIACY	The learner used an inappropriate expression to make a request and may sound impolite.

Appropriacy is an aspect which is often overlooked by teachers. Whereas it's common to see corrections related to grammatical form, for example, it is rare to see comments made on the level of social or cultural appropriacy of something said or written. Learners are often unaware that a change in intonation can indicate a change in attitude and sound impolite, or that a wrong word can come across as rude.

TREATMENT OF ERRORS

Error correction can be a **dilemma** for many teachers as decisions related to the type of error, usefulness, timing, techniques and responsibility for the correction can be difficult to make.

The process of correction starts with the identification of the **type of error** and, for this, teachers need to rely on their **linguistic awareness** and knowledge of the language system. Teachers often shy away from a correction because, although they know that there is something wrong with something said or written, they are not entirely sure how to justify the correction: - What if learners ask me why?

Then, there is the **usefulness** of the correction, i.e. deciding whether to correct or not. The traditional approach is to **offer** corrective feedback if:

- errors affect the general **meaning** and **intelligibility** of something said/written;
- errors are closely related to the **pedagogical focus** of the lesson;
- errors tend to be **systematically** repeated;
- errors tend to be made by the **majority** of the class;
- errors cause **derision** / **stigmatization** from others.

Errors which occur while under **pressure to perform**, the so-called '**slips**', tend to be less 'serious' and teachers tend to ignore them. The same is valid for errors which are made in an attempt to produce language which is above the **level of competence** of the learner. It is unlikely that the learner would be able to repair the error.

Teachers should also be aware of the **affective** impact that a correction can have on the learner. It would be **counterproductive**, and **insensitive**, to correct a shy or weak learner who is trying to express himself/herself, a learner who is trying to convey a message that has emotional significance, etc. Teachers need to remember the human side of the classroom and use their personal judgement.

Another issue is the **timing** of the correction and there is no consensus on the effectiveness of **immediate** (i.e. during an activity) and **delayed** (i.e. after an activity) corrective feedback. Traditionally, immediate feedback tends

to be favored during **accuracy-focused** activities, whereas delayed feedback tends to be recommended after **fluency-focused** activities so as to minimize interruptions to the flow of communication. Teachers quietly observe the learners carry out an activity, record relevant errors and give feedback after the activity. However, there is theoretical support for immediate feedback during fluency activities as learners may be better able to notice their knowledge gaps and may be more receptive to changes to their language system (i.e. interlanguage) when engaged in meaningful communication. The correction itself may be more meaningful. In this case, teachers should try to minimize disruptions and be as unobtrusive as possible.

There are a number of accepted **techniques** that can support corrective feedback. The following is a list with a brief description.

Let's imagine a learner made the following mistake when describing a businessman: - ***He's richest man in the world!***

TECHNIQUE	DESCRIPTION
CLARIFICATION	Pretend not to have understood and ask the learner to repeat. 'Sorry, what did you say? Can you repeat that please?'
ECHO	Repeat verbatim what the learner said using a quizzical/rising intonation: He's RICHEST man in the world?
ELICITATION	Inform the learner the sentence contains a mistake and encourage correction. 'Good try! There's a mistake in your sentence. Can you try again?'
EXPLICIT CORRECTION	Highlight the mistake explicitly and provide the correct model. 'OK. There's a mistake in your sentence. You should have said - He's the richest man in the world.'
FACIAL EXPRESSION/GESTURE	Inform the learner that what was said is not entirely correct via frowning, wobbling your hand, etc. paired with humming (Mmmhhh...) and encourage repetition.
FINGER CORRECTION	Ask the learner to repeat and at the same time use your fingers to represent each word in the sentence and locate the mistake. 'He (thumb) is (index) the (middle finger) richest (ring finger) man (little finger). Wiggle the middle finger to show the learner that something is missing in that position.'
HINT	Use metalanguage to help the learner identify the mistake and prompt the correction. 'Use the article before the adjective. It's a superlative.'
IGNORE THE ERROR	Pretend not to have noticed the mistake and note it down for some delayed feedback.
INTERRUPTED ECHO	Repeat verbatim what the learner said up to the error. 'He's...'
OPTIONS	Provide a choice of options to prompt the correction. 'He's richest, the richest or a richest man?'
PROMPT	Question the learner about the accuracy of the utterance. 'Do we say - He's richest man?'
QUESTIONS	Ask a follow up question to encourage the learner to use the target language again. 'Really? What else is he? Is he powerful?'
REFORMULATION/RECAST	Reformulate the utterance providing the correction, possibly highlighting the mistake. 'Yes, I know. He's THE richest man in the world.'
WHITEBOARD	Write the entire utterance or part of it on the whiteboard to help the learner visualize the mistake and correct it. Gapped sentences, timelines, etc. can also be helpful.

Adapted from: Thornbury and Watkins (2007)

Some of these techniques (e.g. elicitation, prompts, options, etc.) are **explicit**, i.e. the correction is overt, and the learner is informed of the error and encouraged to repair it. Others (e.g. recasts, clarification requests, etc.) are **implicit**, i.e. the correction is covert and the learner is not informed of the error, but may notice it and repair it. Although both approaches can have a positive impact on acquisition, explicit correction is believed to be more effective in promoting noticing of knowledge gaps. Explicit correction tends to be favored during accuracy-focused activities, whereas implicit correction may be more suitable during fluency-focused activities.

Finally, teachers have to decide who should be **responsible** for the correction. These are the options.

- **Self-correction:** the learner is given a chance to correct the error.
- **Peer-correction:** another learner is invited to correct the error.
- **Teacher-correction:** the teacher corrects the error.

Each option has its **advantages** and **disadvantages** and there is no consensus on what can be more effective. Self-correction means that the learner has to make the effort to repair an error independently, but it may also be frustrating to try to correct something which is unknown. Peer-correction can allow other learners to think about an error and repair it, but it may be embarrassing and create conflicts. Teacher-correction ensures that the repair will be accurate, but it may result in spoon-feeding and less involvement from learners.

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For more information on error correction in writing lessons, please refer to the following handout:

▪ Teaching Writing

In conclusion, error correction can be beneficial as long as learners are able to **notice** and **uptake** the error, and **focused** correction (i.e. correction of specific errors) is believed to be more effective than **unfocused** correction (i.e. correction of all errors). Correction is a component of **feedback**, and teachers should be reminded that information about performance should also include a good dose of **positive reinforcement**.

TEACHING TIPS

- Errors should not be left unattended as corrective feedback is considered to be a useful component in assisting second language acquisition. At the same time, you should not 'overestimate' its impact (i.e. correction doesn't necessarily result in repair).
- Not all errors should be corrected: focused correction (i.e. correction of specific errors) is believed to be more effective than unfocused correction (i.e. correction of all errors).
- Try to give more attention to errors which:
 - a. affect the general meaning and intelligibility of something said/written;
 - b. tend to be systematically repeated;
 - c. tend to be made by the majority of the class;
 - d. may cause derision / stigmatization from others;
 - e. are closely related to the pedagogical focus of the lesson.
- 'Competence' inaccuracies (i.e. caused by lack of knowledge) should be given priority over 'performance' inaccuracies (i.e. caused by stress, fatigue, time-pressure, etc.).
- Try to pay attention to inaccuracies related meaning, form, pronunciation, register, appropriacy, etc. and prioritize these aspects according to context.
- Carefully consider the emotional/affective impact that corrective feedback (especially public feedback) may have. For some learners, correction may affect motivation and confidence, and it may cause unnecessary anxiety.
- Although there are pedagogical grounds for encouraging self-correction before peer- or teacher-correction, this should not be seen as a prescription. It would be frustrating for learners to try to correct something they don't know. Also, peer-correction can create conflicts among the members of the learner group. Always consider the nature of the error and opt for suitable correction strategies.
- Although both implicit (e.g. recasts, clarification requests, etc.) and explicit (e.g. hints, options, etc.) correction can have a positive impact on acquisition, explicit correction is believed to be more effective in promoting noticing of knowledge gaps. Try to offer implicit feedback first, and if it doesn't work, switch to more explicit techniques.
- Different stages of a lesson may lend themselves to more or less attention to errors and corrections. Generally speaking, a stage focused on accuracy may require more 'repair' work than a stage focused on fluency. However, corrective feedback has a place in both accuracy and fluency work.
- There is no consensus on the effectiveness of immediate and delayed corrective feedback. Traditionally, immediate feedback tends to be emphasized during accuracy-oriented activities whereas delayed feedback tends to be advocated in fluency-oriented activities. However, there is theoretical support for immediate feedback during fluency activities as learners may be better able to notice their knowledge gaps and may be more receptive to changes to their interlanguage.

- Make sure learners are aware that they are being corrected and allow sufficient 'thinking' time for them to 'repair' their production. If learners are unable/unwilling to 'repair' their productions (i.e. produce correct forms), you shouldn't insist on it as simple repetition of a correct form is not an indication of 'appropriation' of such form.
- Always consider the context in which you teach and survey the learners' attitudes towards correction. Take a more bottom-up perspective and adjust your practice according to your learners' needs and wants.
- Try to provide corrections and positive reinforcement in a balanced way. Try not to end lessons with too much feedback on errors (other stages during the lesson will allow you to do so). Try instead to emphasize good language models and evaluate the learners' performance in relation to communicative effectiveness.

FURTHER READING

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