

# Some Practical Tips on Error Correction

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**Abstract** – Error correction is an essential step in realizing one’s own mistakes and understanding the correct way to say something. When, why and how to correct students errors in the EFL classroom is an issue of concern for every teacher. Some of them think that it is a controversial topic, but on one point they agree; it helps learning. What should we correct, when should we correct it, and how should it be corrected? How do we give students the feedback they need and want to improve without damaging fluency and motivation? There is, unfortunately, no conclusive evidence, but there’s a lot of convincing research that error correction helps learning. EFL teachers always need to be careful of the balance between fluency and accuracy. Why make corrections? For one thing, it’s a positive step. The purpose of this theoretical article is to highlight teacher’s awareness on mistakes, to consider their own attitudes, the classroom behavior, and to help novice teachers overcome the early difficulties when handling mistakes and errors in their classes.

**Keywords** – Errors, Managing Mistakes, Peer Correction, Tips.

## I. ERROR CORRECTION IN EFL

“In dealing with errors, teachers have looked for correction techniques that, rather than simply giving students the answer on a plate, help them to make their corrections. This according to J. Scrivener (2005) may raise their own awareness about the language they are using. ‘What you tell me, I forget; what I discover for myself, I remember’<sup>1</sup>.

But still, one of the main dilemmas for teachers, is error correction. It’s always tricky to know when and if to correct students and how to go about it. Five teachers’ questions have to be asked, when dealing with oral errors:

- ✓ What kind of error has been made?
- ✓ Whether to deal with it/them or not?
- ✓ When to deal with it?
- ✓ Who will correct?
- ✓ Which technique to use?

Deciding how to correct students errors in the EFL classroom is an issue of concern for every EFL teacher. What should we correct, when should we correct it, and how should it be corrected? There is, unfortunately, no conclusive evidence. Research seems to indicate that the most effective ways to deal with errors and offer corrections seem to include:

- Do correct mistakes when hearing the wrong version.
- Listen for errors and make a general review of them at the end of the activity segment.
- Encourage peer correction and help students to self-correct.
- Correct the student personally (use this less than the other methods).

- Pay attention to right answers.

Our approach to correcting errors needs to reflect the *skill levels* and *educational history* of our students. If they have studied in a highly *punitive environment*, we have to then work more on *fluency* as they will likely be hesitant to speak at all. If they come from a *liberal “anything goes”* environment then we may need to stress *accuracy*.

## II. FORMS OF ERROR CORRECTIONS

Error correction is an essential step in realizing one’s own mistakes and understanding the correct way to say something. On the other hand, it would be almost impossible to correct every mistake in the EFL classroom, so we are left with the question of what should be corrected and when. Which mistakes should be corrected depends mostly on the circumstances. Generally teachers should offer corrections for mistakes using:

- The target language.
- Language previously taught (especially if it recent).
- Common mistakes (made by either the class or individuals).
- Mistakes that alter the meaning of a sentence.

So corrections should be given selectively. We should particularly be looking for errors using the *target language*, *language previously taught*, or *common/serious mistakes*. Some frequent forms of error corrections we use in our classes are:

### Teacher-correction

It makes sense that the person to correct the errors should be the teacher. We know the problem and the solution, and can define and put things simply so that the student can understand the mistake. The student should trust what we say, respecting our place as a fluent speaker of English. Teacher correction also allows us to deal with the error using the best technique.

### Student--Student Correction (Peer Correction)

Student-student correction gets the class involved, keeping them mentally alert. It decreases TTT, (teacher talking time) and encourages the class to speak up. The advantages of students doing the correction are obvious:

- They feel more involved.
- They learn to be more independent.
- The feeling of cooperation is greater.
- It reduces the time the teacher spends talking.

### Self-Correction

What we want our students to remember is the right version, not the mistake. The best thing to do this is self-correction. It is an effective technique. Students who can correct themselves are probably going to remember both the problem and the solution, and will feel more confident having recognized their own mistakes. In a real situation, the teacher won’t be there to offer corrections, so self-correction is the real goal for a student. A mix of all three techniques is perhaps the best way to achieve results, so

<sup>1</sup> Scrivener, Jim, “*Learning Teaching*” A handbook for English Language Teachers, 2-nd edition, Macmillan Publications, 2005. pp. 298-303.

we must try to vary our methods.

### Correct (Time and Again) During Speech

As mentor teachers we advise our students (*who will start their teaching carrier*) never to interrupt students when they are in the middle of speaking in a communication activity. It is inappropriate, may disturb the communicative flow of speaking, and distract them. But on the other hand, letting an error to pass by, without being noticed, or corrected, may contribute to the formation of wrong patterns. It would be difficult for them in the future to get and fix the correct pattern. So there is no 'always' or 'never' here, there are cases when it should be done. It's one of those quick decisions that teachers make up, all the time, in their classes. What really helps here is *experience* and *being aware of the students' own preferences*. It is needed to talk to our students about error correction and to find out from them how they like to be corrected. Often students have clear ideas about how they would like us to correct them.

### Draw Attention to Correct Answers

Normally, it doesn't occur to teachers to comment on what is correct in students productions. "*But it's a good learning opportunity. It looks like providing error correction without the error,*"<sup>2</sup> (Ur, 2016) just paying attention to appropriate language. Sometimes it is really effective to use students' own productions (*written or spoken*) as a teaching aid for new language, or as a basis for reinforcement. Students respond positively to this and 'notice' the item well.

## III. EFFECTIVENESS OF ERROR CORRECTION

For error correction to be effective, learners need to know that they are being corrected. The teacher, however, may not want to interrupt a task to correct a student if the error is not negatively affecting communication or completion of the task. One common solution is to make note of errors and then later in class put those errors up on the board.

A slight variation on this that we have found to be an improvement is, to put the errors and corrections on to a Power Point slide while the students are doing something else. Then when it's time to review the mistakes bring them up one at a time on the board and ask students for corrections. Getting students to think about what the mistake is rather than just giving them the answer results in more thinking and stronger learning. Students are actively involved in the error correction. At one end of the spectrum are teachers who will correct every single error the student makes. This can have negative results: we might end in either being a *heavy corrector* or a *non corrector*:

#### • The Problems of the Heavy Corrector:

- Students may feel intimidated and stop speaking for fear of being corrected in front of the class.
- It can interrupt the flow of speech and break a student's thought or concentration.
- Lack of independent thought - the students' linguistic

brains work along pre-set lines. They tend to come up with fixed phrases and are unable to make new and original language.

- Tension-students are worried about making mistakes.
- Lack of "space" - the student's creativity is stifled, because accuracy is valued much more highly than fluency or imagination.
- *The Problems of the Non-Corrector:*
  - At the other end of the spectrum are teachers who do not correct any mistakes but again this can have negative results:
    - Students do not realise they are making mistakes and believe they are error-free.
    - Students-anxiety - students begin to wonder if the teacher knows what s/he is doing.
    - Complaints a. students often complain about being corrected too little (they rarely complain openly about being corrected too much) Sometimes they go to the teacher to complain, but at other times to people above the teacher.
    - Complaints b. parents and school authorities are often unhappy about a non correcting teacher, especially when the teacher is preparing the students for an exam. (Exams are often accuracy-based.)
    - Image - others tend to think you are lazy, irresponsible or incompetent. (Bartram & Walton, 2000).

#### How Can we Cope with these Problems?

If you are an "over-corrector":

- Correct less!
- Correct at specific points of your lesson.
- Give your students more room.
- Correct better-use a better/different technique.

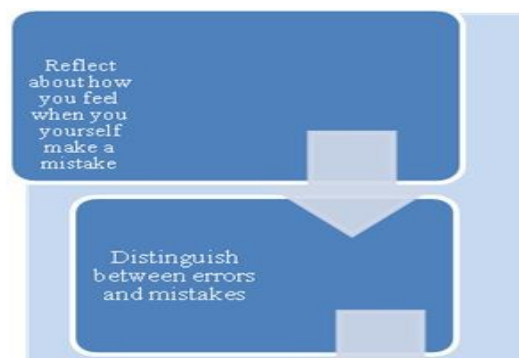
If you are an "non-corrector":

- Be prepared to do more public 'relations'.
- Take students into your confidence.
- Be prepared to compromise sometimes.

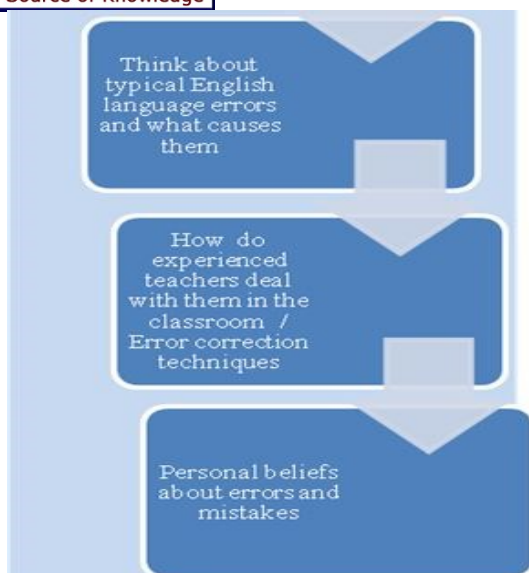
Teachers can, of course, adopt a middle way. Here they might correct:

- When the student needs correction in order to continue.
- When the meaning of what the student says is uncertain.
- When several students make the same mistake.

From my personal experience, I would suggest the following table to novice teachers to help them *structure a map* (in their lesson plan) about error correction:



<sup>2</sup> Penny Ur's 100 Teaching Tips (2016)



#### IV. CONCLUSION

These priorities are highly subjective. Our biggest asset is our knowledge of the class, not our knowledge of the language. Lots of teachers have worked out that some correction is useful for a number of reasons: students are so varied in their backgrounds, their needs and their expectations, or because their learning styles are so different. It is clear that *confidence* is the key word. Some students gain confidence from being allowed to express themselves without being picked up for every mistake; some gain confidence from knowing very strictly the limits of what is right and wrong.

Good mistake-management enables teachers to continue to maintain a professional position in front of students, colleagues and authorities alike, whilst avoiding the problems, both didactic and psychological, which over-correction, or poor-correction, brings. It is clear that our teaching must be flexible enough to help both groups, the ones who look for freedom within the language, who want to experiment, who want to take a chance and the ones who feel that experimentation might lead to frustration of too many mistakes and even to incomprehensibility, who like the security of being right. Learning is a mixture of gaining confidence and being adventurous. We should not plan our lessons or write our course-books with the idea of mistakes in the front of our minds.

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