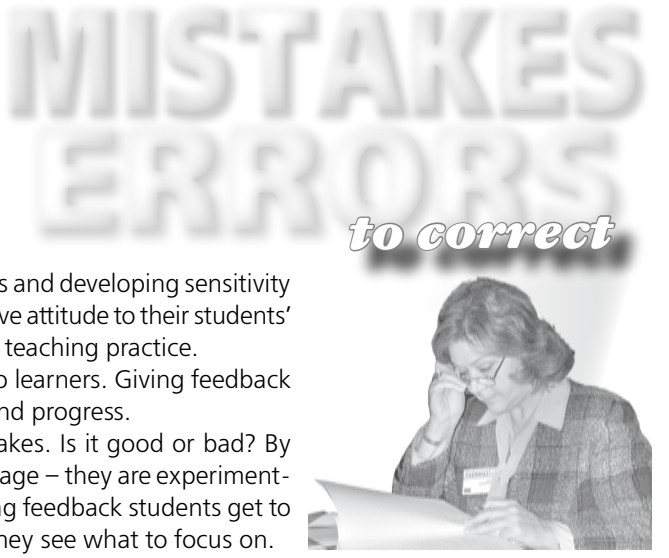
We All Make Mistakes



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This article is provided to help teachers in raising awareness and developing sensitivity in correcting errors, to encourage them to develop a positive attitude to their students' errors and demonstrate ways of how to correct errors in teaching practice.

One of the responsibilities of a teacher is to give feedback to learners. Giving feedback the teacher facilitates the learners' evaluation of their success and progress.

At various stages of language learning students make mistakes. Is it good or bad? By making errors learners are testing out their ideas about the language – they are experimenting. So, making errors is part of the learning process: by receiving feedback students get to know the difference between correct and incorrect language, they see what to focus on.

Why do they make mistakes? It is caused by many reasons. The most common one is the students' own language. A good example occurs when students make mistakes in word order. Grammatical consideration matters too. The learners often have problems with the use of articles, tenses, prepositions.

Task 1. *Write down some mistakes that your learners make when they speak a foreign language. What mistakes do they make (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary errors, word order)? Why do you think they make mistakes? What causes them? Fill in the chart. Some are done for you.*

Error	***Possible cause***
1. They joined to the club.	1. Influence of the speaker's first language.
2. He growed up in Canada.	2. Learners are tired or careless and just forget the correct language.
3. We leave in Omsk.	3. Learners know the rule but haven,t processed the language deeply enough for it to have become automatic.
4. I very much love apples.	4. They know the rule but over-generalise (instead of came they say comed).
5. The Moscow is beautiful.	5. Learners know they are not correct but are trying to communicate smth quite complicated by using the language they already know.
	6. Any other ?

Methodologist J. Edge views that "many of the things we call mistakes and see as problems are in fact signals that our students are successfully learning the language: they are trying things out, testing out their knowledge and skills in learning the language, and making mistakes is a part of their language learning development. He points out that we should not see mistakes as negative. Helping learners by correcting them can be away of giving information, or feedback, to your students, just when it will support their learning" (Edge 1989, p. 17).

But the influence of the students' own language is not the only reason for making mistakes. There is a category which a number of people call "developmental" errors. These are the result of conscious or subconscious processing which frequently overgeneralises a rule,

as, for example, when a student, having learnt to say things like "I worked", then starts saying "I goed", without realizing that the use of ***–ed*** is not permitted with irregular verbs.

Mistakes are of different kinds – some are only slips of the tongue, something which the student knows and will usually get right. Some are the result of under-learning, others are the result of over-learning. Some mistakes are the result of students' completely misunderstanding. So, it's very important to differentiate between a mistake and an error.

An error occurs because the learner doesn't know the correct form and so can't produce it at this stage of learning (ex: Monika says about her plans – *I like to be a teacher, I like to go to Spain next year*). These are errors, because she doesn't know the form *I want to...*, and she uses Present Simple which is familiar to her. Errors can show evidence of learning.

A mistake is a slip of the tongue; the learner knows the correct form but may have forgotten it or he's in a hurry. He can probably correct it himself (ex: *Yesterday I go... no, I went to the cinema*). It is usually caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness.

The question which occurs here is to correct or not to correct. Correction helps students to clarify their understanding of the meaning and construction of language. It is a vital part of the teacher's role and the teacher should be very gentle, tactful and sensitive in correction. What is appropriate for one student maybe quite wrong for another one. In general, the teacher's job is to point out when something has gone wrong and see if the student can correct him / herself. Maybe it was a slip and they can do self-correction. But if they can't, we have to help them. We can do this by asking if someone can help out or by explaining the problem ourselves.

Teachers often worry about when to correct – immediately, after a few minutes, at the end of the activity or in the next lesson or at least never? The distinction between accuracy and fluency aims is important here. If the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is more likely to be useful. If the activity is aimed at fluency, then immediate correction is less appropriate and any correction will probably come after the activity has finished.

We need to balance fluency work, without correction, with accuracy work, where we use correction positively.

Another question that worries teachers is – how to correct? The first thing to remember is that the best form of correction is self-correction. It's very important to give a chance for self-correction when you think that a mistake is what we call a slip. It's better to show the student that a mistake has been made and give him / her a little time to recognize it and correct. Peer correction is very useful as both learners are involved in listening to and thinking about the language, it helps them cooperate and make them less dependent on the teacher. The whole class may be involved in correction. But if we think that a mistake needs to be corrected, if neither the student who made the mistake, nor anybody else in the class can correct it, then the teacher has to help. But this doesn't mean that the teacher has to give the correct form straight away.

The more the students are involved in correction, the more they have to think about the language used in the classroom.

Oral corrections are usually provided directly by the teacher; but they may also be elicited from the learner who made the mistake or by another member of the class. Correction may or may not include a clarification of why it was made, and may or may not require reproduction of the acceptable form by the learner. Correction techniques may vary in the classroom.

Task 2. *Look through the list of techniques and say which of them are the most appropriate and useful for you.*

- Tell learners about a mistake.
- Facial expression: surprise, frown, raised eyebrows, interest.

- Gesture combined with facial expression (worried look or hand outstretched to "hold" the sentence).
- Finger correction.
- Repeat sentence up to error (they looked for a...)
- Echo sentence with changed intonation or stress. (You go to a disco yesterday?)
- Ask a question. (Was this last week?)
- Ask a one-word question. (Tense? Past?)
- Draw a time line on the board.
- Draw spaces or boxes on the board to show the number of words in a sentence.
- Write the problem sentence on the board for discussion.
- Exploit the humour in the error. (St: *The doctor gave her a recipe.* T: *So she made a nice cake.* St: *Not the right word? Ah, he gave her a prescription.*)
- Use the phonemic chart to point at an incorrect phoneme.
- The chain. One student makes an error, the teacher elicits a correction from a student B. If he also fails to get it right then he gets another student C – to help her. If the student gives the correct answer he gives it back to B, then B gives to A and only A gives the correct answer to the teacher.

Many of the things about the correction of spoken language are also true for the correction of written language as it means helping people to become more accurate. Learners' written work includes not only written composition, but also assignments on grammar or vocabulary, answers to comprehension questions. The teachers are expected to respond to their work and provide appropriate feedback.

Task 3. *Share your opinions in groups how to give written feedback. What do you prefer?*

- Do you use a red pen for your comments?
- Do you correct all the mistakes? If so, why? If not, what do you base your decision on which to correct and which not?
- Those mistakes you correct: do you write in the correct form? Simply indicate it is wrong?
- Do you require the students to redo? Why?
- Do you provide your personal response to the content?

Correction is more effective if you devise a simple code which you can write in the margin to draw the students' attention: ***Sp*** – for a spelling mistake, ***Gr*** – for grammar, ***WW*** – for wrong word, ✓– for a missing word, etc. The code helps to highlight important mistakes. When students get their work back they should be asked to see if they can identify the mistakes themselves, with the help of the code.

Making mistakes is a part of learning and correction is a part of teaching. They go together in the work of teachers who see themselves as part of other people's learning, where the teaching exists to serve the learning. We can learn without teachers, but we cannot teach without learners.

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