

Module 7 – Mistake Correction and Feedback

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## I. Classifying mistakes

### 1. Making mistakes: positive experience

In this module you will find out how to correct mistakes and how to assess students' work.

Making mistakes is a necessary part of the language learning process, and on the whole, students that make mistakes are often taking risks and trying something new or what they are not sure about. As teachers, mistakes often show us our students' progress and, as such, they should be seen in a positive light.

Correction is more than giving your students the right answer to a mistake. You need to consider what kind of mistake has been made, why it was made and why, when and how to correct it.

### 2. Errors or mistakes?

The main distinction made between errors and mistakes (or slips) is as follows.

#### **Errors**

These are systematic mistakes which the students are unable to self-correct. They show things that the student has yet to study or understand.

#### **Mistakes (or slips)**

These are non-systematic inaccuracies, and the students should be able to self-correct them.

However, in practice it is very hard to work out if the student is making a mistake or an error. It is more important for the teacher to try to work out why the student has made the mistake and then to correct - or elicit correction.

### 3. Reasons for mistakes

Students make mistakes for different reasons.

#### **Using a higher level of language**

Errors are made when the English is above the student's current language level.

E. g. It's time we go home.

The student has not learnt yet that the phrase 'It's time' needs a past simple.

#### **Overgeneralisation**

This happens when the student applies a general rule that does not apply in the specific situation.

E. g. I am an university student.

The student has learnt that you use 'an' before a vowel. He doesn't yet know that you actually use 'an' before a vowel sound, not vowel letter.

E. g. Yesterday my mother goed to London.

The student has learnt that you form the past simple by adding –ed. They don't yet know that there are irregular past simple verbs.

### **Mother tongue interference (or L1 interference)**

This is when the student's knowledge of his or her native language interferes with their use of English.

E. g. Do you like my new clock? (The student points to his new watch.) In Spanish 'reloj' is the same for clock and watch.

E. g. I have 24 years. (In Romance languages the verb used in the L1 is 'have', for example, 'Tengo 24 años.' in Spanish and 'J'ai 24 ans.' in French.)

### **False friends (or false cognates)**

Here the student uses a word which looks similar to a word in their L1 but which has a different meaning.

E. g. Spanish 'embarazada' means pregnant not embarrassed.

Spanish 'sensible' means sensitive.

Japanese 'manshon' means block of flats / apartment building, not mansion.

### **Slips of the tongue**

These are made by native and non-native speakers alike. They often happen when the speaker is tired, not concentrating or speaking too quickly. Written slips on the computer are normally referred to as 'typos' and can happen when the student is not very good at typing. (Luckily most word processing programs automatically correct these typos.)

## **4. Types of mistakes**

Students can make all manner of mistakes in categories like:

- Grammar
- Vocabulary
- Pronunciation
- Style
- Spelling
- Punctuation

Make sure you can recognise the type, or category, of a mistake. This will enable you to provide valuable feedback to the student. Take a look at the table shown here. On the left you can see the mistake, and on the right, the category of the mistake.

Did you went to the cinema last night?	Grammar
Suzie doesn't like making the washing up.	Vocabulary
It's Important. (the first syllable is stressed)	Pronunciation
Host mother: "What would you like to drink?" Exchange student: "I want coffee."	Style
Their house is red.	Spelling
I'd like some coffee ham and eggs.	Punctuation

## II. Methods of correction

### 1. Accuracy vs. fluency

So how do you know when to correct? First, consider the type of activity your students are doing. Activities to develop productive skills (speaking and writing) fit somewhere on the communicative continuum.

When your students are doing **controlled** activities they are working on **accuracy**, that is, correct language. The aim is not normally communicative.

When your students are working on **free** activities the focus is on **fluency** and on communication. Thus, you are more likely to correct, or elicit self-correction, during accuracy activities than fluency activities.

At the presentation and controlled practice stages, mistakes will normally need to be corrected immediately. This is sometimes referred to as **immediate correction**. During the production stage, it is normal to leave the correction for later. This is sometimes called **delayed correction**.

### 2. Correction types

There are three main types of correction:

1. Self-correction : The student corrects his/her own mistake, normally once the teacher has indicated there's a mistake.
2. Peer correction : One of the student's classmates corrects the mistake.
3. Teacher correction

Where possible you should encourage the students to self-correct as this is the best way for them to identify their mistakes and subsequently to learn from them. When a student is not able to self-correct it is normal to encourage his peers to help. Your final option, especially with speaking activities, is to correct the mistake yourself.

### 3. Accuracy work: techniques of immediate correction

When you have decided a mistake needs to be corrected immediately, you need to select the best way to indicate where the problem lies. You can use one of the following techniques.

#### **Offer a puzzled facial expression and have the student repeat the sentence**

Student: Can I drink?

Teacher shows a puzzled facial expression

Student: Can I go and drink water please?

Student: My dad has got a car red.  
Teacher shows a puzzled facial expression.  
Student: Red car.

### **Highlight the missed words with hand gestures**

This works best with short sentences or when you want the student to use a contraction.  
This can be shown with each finger representing a word.

Student: I can to play football.  
Teacher shows five fingers and then bends the middle finger showing the “to” should be eliminated, leaving “I can play football.”  
Student: I can play football.

Student: I would like a beer, please.  
Teacher shows two fingers “I would” then puts them together “I’d”.  
Student: I’d like a beer, please.

### **Repeat the student's words up to the point of the error and let the student continue**

Student: I like listening pop music.  
Teacher: I like listening ...  
Student: to pop music. (Or: I like listening to pop music.)

### **Draw a diagram**

Student: I have two mouses at home.  
Teacher draws one mouse and encircles it, then two mice and encircles them. Points to the single mouse.  
Teacher: One... Student: Mouse.  
Teacher points to the two mice.  
Teacher: Two... Student: Mice.

### **Indicate the mistake with your voice**

For example, stressing the incorrect word or saying the sentence with rising intonation, (echoing the mistake.)

Student: Everybody know her.  
Teacher: Everybody know her?(stressing ‘know’ with rising intonation)  
Student: Knows (Or: Everybody knows her)

### **Identify the type of mistake**

For example, say 'tense.'

Student: Mark sleeps.  
Teacher: Tense!  
Student: Mark is sleeping.

### **Ask the student to repeat what they said**

Student: He will to go home now.

Teacher: Sorry?

Student: He will go home now.

### **Indicate the mistake with a gesture**

Gesture for the past = pointing over shoulder.

Student: I go to Tokyo last week.

Teacher pointing backwards.

Student: I went to Tokyo last week.

### **Give the student two options**

Student: I was telling on the phone.

Teacher: Telling or talking?

Student: Talking.

### **Reformulate the mistake, using the correct language**

Student: I watch a film at the cinema yesterday.

Teacher: Did you? I watched a film on TV.

## **4. Fluency work: techniques of delayed correction**

During a fluency activity it's not a good idea to interrupt the students. The focus is on communication, that is, on what they are saying, not on how they are saying it.

The only time you may choose to intervene is when communication breaks down. However, there will be mistakes that you want to bring to your students' attention. How can you do this?

The most common way is to take notes of mistakes that you hear as you monitor the fluency activity. When the activity has finished, as part of the feedback you should review the mistakes with your students.

Teachers normally choose to write the mistake on the board and have students correct it, for example:

It he had studied, he would be passing the exam last week.

Turn left in the corner.

You can also add a question:

walked "How do you pronounce this word?"

castle "Which letter is silent?"

comfortable “Where is the stress?”  
Wednesday “How many syllables are there?”

It’s a good idea to keep these mistakes anonymous so that your students don’t feel uncomfortable.

Remember also to focus on the main mistakes. It will take much too long to correct all the mistakes made in the fluency activity and will be counter-productive as your students won’t be able to remember so many points.

## 5. Correcting written work

Writing can also be either self-corrected, peer corrected or teacher corrected. Again, the amount of correction done will depend on the activity itself and whether the focus is **accuracy** or **fluency**.

You could correct all your student’s written mistakes, but this is a lengthy process and is not necessarily the best way for your students to develop their writing skills.

There are four commonly used methods of correcting written mistakes.

You can either identify the error above the word or phrase using a correction code, at the beginning (or end) of the line of text, or by underlining the word or phrase. You may also decide not to mark the text at all but to comment underneath.

Most teachers start by using a correction code. Here is a typical correction code, but remember this is only a suggestion, and you can modify the code to suit your students.

Gr = grammar mistake (This could also include T = tense.)

V = vocabulary mistake

Sp = spelling

P = punctuation

□ = word missing

? = Please ask me. (Or “I don’t understand this.”)

It’s a good idea to add a couple of more personal overall comments to work. These can be about strengths or areas of opportunity (weaknesses).

For example:

*Julia, your letter writing is improving a lot. The paragraphs are looking much better. Just remember that English sentences tend to be shorter than Spanish sentences.*

*Takeshi, this is a very exciting story. What happens next? I hope you’ll be able to continue it soon.*

Corrections can be made and comments can be written in various colours. Ultimately the choice is yours, but some teachers would argue that red can come across aggressively on the page. You might want to consider using some other colour that contrasts with the student’s work, such as blue, black or green.



### III. Assessment and feedback

#### 1. Ways of assessment

It is important to continually assess students' work and give them feedback on how they are doing. There are a number of reasons for that. For example, they may need to gauge their progress because of a possible promotion, to pass an exam, to get into a better school or university or they may simply need a confidence boost. As well as your students, there may be other interested parties, such as teachers or employers who will also want to know how the students are doing.

There are a number of ways to assess students' progress. For example,

- Exams and tests
- Grades
- Report cards
- Written feedback on homework and classwork
- Spoken comments (in class or at a formal meeting)
- Portfolios.

#### 2. Informal feedback

Informal feedback is the most natural, and thus common type of feedback to use in class.

Spoken comments are a good way to offer performance feedback in the classroom. You might say "Yes" or "Good", or smile or nod, to show that an answer is correct.

Maybe you could say "Are you sure?" after a wrong answer. You might even just give the student a puzzled look and encourage them to think again. (These puzzled looks aren't only for language mistakes!)

At times you might even say, "That's a great idea, but it's not right!" This is a form of informal feedback.

The way you give this informal feedback is important. If you are able to give accurate feedback that encourages your students even when they make mistakes then you'll be able to build positive rapport with them, which will add to their motivation.

Remember to praise your students when they get things right or do well (and not just comment when they have things wrong.) Always write at least one positive comment on a piece of written work. When writing comments on report cards aim to write a positive comment followed by a not so positive comment, then a final positive comment.

Congratulate groups of students on a job well done, and, if you're teaching children, send a message home to parents about good work and behaviour (not just poor work or bad behaviour!)

### 3. Types of tests

The most common way of assessing students is through the use of exams or tests. These test such skills as reading, writing, listening and speaking, as well as grammar, vocabulary and spelling.

There are four common types of tests.

#### **Placement test**

The aim of this test is to place new students in the correct level. (This is common at language schools made up of many different levels.)

#### **Diagnostic test**

This is given at the beginning of a course to identify the students' strengths and weaknesses.

#### **Progress (achievement) test**

This is taken during, or at the end of the course to find out the students' level of English in relation to the course objectives.

#### **Proficiency test**

This type of test shows the student's level of English against a specific standard. International exams such as IELTS, TOEFL or Cambridge First Certificate are examples of this.

### 4. Grading

Written tasks with only **one correct answer** make ideal diagnostics for your students, and will be easy to grade for you. These might include:

- Multiple choice questions (MCQs)
- Gapfill tasks (or cloze)
- True / False or Yes / No questions (These may also include a third option "Not given".)
- Filling in a chart or graph, or labelling a diagram.
- Sentence or paragraph reordering
- Sentence transformation (that is, writing the same idea using different grammar)

For subjective tasks it's important to establish grading criteria. Imagine you were giving each answer 4 points. You could decide to give two points for the students' ideas and two points for grammar and vocabulary.

Take a look at this example from Cambridge PET (reading and writing, paper 1). In the final task the students had to write 35-45 words. The task focus is on "control and range of language" (PET Handbook 2003 page 11). In order to be fair when grading this task a set of criteria is used as shown here.

Mark	Criteria
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All content elements covered appropriately.</li> <li>Message clearly communicated to reader.</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All content elements adequately dealt with.</li> <li>Message communicated successfully, on the whole.</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All content elements attempted.</li> <li>Message requires some effort by the reader.</li> </ul> <p>or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One content element omitted but others clearly communicated.</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two content elements omitted, or unsuccessfully dealt with.</li> <li>Message only partly communicated to reader</li> </ul> <p>or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Script may be slightly short (20-25) words.</li> </ul>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Little relevant content and/or message requires excessive effort by the reader, or short (10-19) words.</li> </ul>
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Totally irrelevant or totally incomprehensible or too short (under 10 words)</li> </ul>

Using a series of criteria like this (also known as a rubric) helps you to grade all your students the same.

In addition to the actual test you will have to give your students a final grade. This may be alphabetical (for example Cambridge CPE passing grades are A, B and C) or numerical, (for example IELTS which is graded from 0 to 9.)

You may have many variations (A+,A, A-, A/B) or few options (A, B, C.) You will also need to find out how you should grade your students. Often you will grade against the objectives which means students can all get the top grade (or indeed fail!)

However, you may have to grade on a curve. This means that a pre-established number of students get each grade. This normally means that only a small percentage can get the best grade.

### Report cards

You will often be asked to record your grades on a report card. There may also be a chance to include some comments about the student's progress.

If you are working at a school (rather than a language school) then you may also have parent-teacher meetings when you discuss the students' progress with their parents.

## **Portfolio**

It is also becoming more and more common to take a portfolio of the student's work with you so you can show the parents how the student is progressing.

Portfolios can either show the progression of work during the course or the student's best work from the course. It's important to include the students in choosing the work as this will also enable them to chart their own progress.

Portfolios can be used for both young and adult learners. In conjunction with the use of rubrics they are a great way of helping students assess their own work - promoting learner autonomy.

## **5. Self-assessment and peer assessment**

As mentioned before, using self-assessment and peer assessment is a good way of helping students assess their own work while promoting learner autonomy. This is especially useful if you are teaching a large group.

In large groups it is hard for the teacher to review all of the written work that the students produce. However, if you train your students to grade their own and each other's work using rubrics or grading criteria you will both save time and help them develop a greater awareness of their skills.

Working on assessments in small groups will help students develop a better understanding of the grading criteria and allow them to identify more mistakes in each other's work and thus to learn from these mistakes. Remember that self-correction is the best way for a student to learn and avoid the same mistakes in the future.

Students should also be encouraged to check each other's answers to reading, listening and grammar tasks. Sometimes when we check our own work we read what we think we have written and not what we have actually written. (This is common in our native language too.) When checking someone else's work it's easier to spot errors such as spelling mistakes or punctuation problems.

Peer assessment can also help to develop a positive atmosphere in the classroom as the students work together to improve their English. This will, of course, take work on the part of the teacher to make sure that students are collaborating and co-operating (rather than criticising or competing.)

Developing self-assessment in the classroom can also lead to students studying more outside the classroom as they are more confident in themselves and feel that they know what they need to do to improve because you have given them the guidelines to follow to do so.