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voices

LINKING, DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROFESSIONALS WORLDWIDE



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From ear to there! – *Deak Kirkham* | Sugata Mitra in my conversation classes – *Elsbeth Mäder*
Choral recitation in the classroom – *Fatima Sarwar*
Error management in the language classroom – *Michael T R Madill*
Peer review in student teacher training – *Karin da Rocha & Agnès Haidacher-Horn*
Reverse Culture Shock (RCS) – *Bettina Ribes-Gil*
Attention is the key, but what is key to attention? – *Harisimran Sandhu*
Creating good reading lessons – *George Scott Murdoch*
Teaching English to Arabic speakers – *Muhammed Eissa*

Error management in the language classroom

Michael Madill uses student errors to promote learning.



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Effective error management is an indispensable part of teaching English as students are typically a long way from being proficient in the language they are learning. For example, Burt (1975) reported how, '... given that students attempt to use English before they have mastered it, it becomes necessary for teachers to be prepared to handle the variety of errors that inevitably occur in student speech and writing' (p. 53). These

inaccuracies are expected because if language learners never take risks in the classroom and make errors, then they will never improve. Thus, important questions are how often language learners' errors should be corrected and if so, when, which, and how should they be addressed? We will explore the fundamentals of errors in the language classroom, identify correction pedagogies that promote learning, and examine management techniques that are

effective in developing language skills among learners in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

A vital part of the acquisition process, errors are not necessarily negative occurrences. We can deduce this because 'Language learning, like any kind of human learning, involves committing errors' (Touchie 1986: 75). For example, to illustrate their capacities, errors show us gaps in student learning that need to be addressed in order to further comprehension and knowledge. Furthermore, if corrected properly, most students will learn from their errors. Finally, if students are not making any errors then, in reality, the material is

not challenging enough and needs to be reconsidered. For these reasons, errors are essential in learners' language development.

It is sometimes said that learning a language is like learning to ride a bicycle and we all know that everyone falls once or twice while learning. Why then should language acquisition be any different? As Scrivener (2005) states, 'Student errors are evidence that progress is being made. Errors often

show us that a student is experimenting with language, trying out ideas, taking risks, attempting to communicate, and making progress' (p. 298). Therefore, what we need to do is use these errors to our advantage and our students' benefit by incorporating them as teaching opportunities that will increase our teaching effectiveness. When we are more effective, our students become more proficient in their language abilities.

Regarding the *frequency* of error correction, allowing student errors to go uncorrected will become an issue if students do not realise the problem in the first place or they lack the knowledge to produce the language themselves. This leads to error reoccurrence and the stagnation of their language development. On the other hand, correcting every error is time consuming, disturbs the flow of the lesson, and can decrease student confidence and motivation. Consequently, both under-correction and over-correction can have unfavourable effects on student learning and the teacher walks a very fine line when attempting to balance the decision to correct or not correct.

This brings us to the question of *when* language errors should be corrected. Scrivener (2005) states that 'If the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is likely to be useful; if the aim is fluency, then lengthy, immediate correction that diverts from the flow of speaking is less appropriate' (p. 299). This is supported by Harmer (2001) who states that 'During communicative activities ... it is generally felt that teachers should not interrupt students in mid-flow to point out a grammatical, lexical, or pronunciation error, since to do so interrupts the communication and drags an activity back to the study of language form or precise meaning' (p. 105). We can conclude that it is a good idea to allow students to make some minor errors that are not related to the teaching aim because it aids lesson progression and flow. If the focus is production, fluency, or communicative activities, then the errors should not be immediately corrected. In contrast, errors related to a specific lesson aim, such as pronunciation or grammar, should be corrected right away because '... errors relevant to a pedagogical focus should receive more attention from the teacher than other errors' (Touchie 1986: 80).

Now we can investigate *how to address* these errors. It is essential to understand that 'It is important for teachers not to correct learner errors or give the right answers to them immediately; giving cues to the students so they can correct their own errors will further activate their linguistic competence' (Makino 1993: 340). Correcting errors can be a challenging task but one thing that makes it easier is the concept that '... students can also be extremely effective

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at monitoring and judging their own language production' (Harmer 2001: 102). What this means is that learners are often capable of using their schema or prior knowledge to correct their own inaccuracies if they are aware of their error and given time to self-correct. For example, 'In the process of language learning, learners sometimes notice some of their errors by themselves, through the strategy of monitoring, and they can also correct some of their errors when other people, such as teachers or peers, give them cues or hints about them' (Makino 1993: 338). Research has proven that student-corrected errors are more beneficial to language development and consequently should be a priority in educational pedagogy.

This brings us to the final question of *how to correct students' errors* in the language classroom. This concept relates to overall teacher–student and student–student interactions. One example involves direct teacher–student correspondence involving elicitation, concept questioning, repeating the answer with questioning intonation, or prompting. These collaborations typically involve self-correction which leads to greater student development as they are in control of their learning. The disadvantages of this technique involve the possibility of increased anxiety and demotivation if the student is unwillingly singled out in front of their peers or cannot provide the correct answer.

Another correction technique utilises student–student interactions and includes peer, partner, and group correction where classmates rectify the errors made. This can follow teacher–student self-correction attempts where the student is unable to formulate an answer. This could also occur in partner to partner or group member to group member interactions where students help each other to correct their answers. Some advantages are that it includes other students in the discussion and learning process; it can be a quick and relaxed way to correct errors; and it can also create a positive classroom environment that fosters constructive communication and feedback. On the other hand, this technique could create resentment or competitiveness among students, hindering constructive classroom dynamics. The appropriateness of these techniques will depend on

the classroom environment and the level of interaction that is common among the target students.

Of all the approaches, sometimes the best tactic is to note the errors being made during the lesson and address them at the end of class. This has the added benefit of not interrupting the lesson and also does not single out students in front of their peers. Regardless of the method used, the teacher must be flexible, dynamic, and able to adapt their correction methodology to suit the context. In addition, using the appropriate method and creating a relaxed classroom environment will help students feel more comfortable making and learning from their errors. In conclusion, error management is an essential factor in effective teaching and learning. Students need to understand that errors are a positive part of the learning process and teachers need to incorporate pedagogy that fosters effective correction. Everyone falls when learning to ride a bicycle, hence educators and students need to realise that when you fall, it is important to get back up and keep learning the language.

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