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Correcting or not Errors and Mistakes

Abstract

If in 1960s errors had to be avoided at all costs (Grammar – Translation Method), today errors are viewed as an integral part of the language process, thus the attitude towards errors has changed a lot, but anyway no ready-made recipes can be offered. Experience offered in this article is proved in various classes while the author has been teaching or observing others colleagues’ classes. Through many years error correction has been an issue very debatable and yet nobody can say that it is an exhausted and completely explored issue. In this article some procedures, ideas, suggestions, tips are offered to help the teachers use effective ways in correcting oral or written work. This is the result of a long experience of teaching and preparing teachers of English.

Introduction

Grammar-Translation Method was widely used in teaching foreign languages, especially in the 60’s and it is still in use nowadays for various reasons. In the field of error correction it was asked for the elimination of all errors and mistakes at all costs. Today the attitude towards errors has changed a lot; errors are viewed as an integral part of the language process. There cannot be learning without making mistakes or errors. But no ready-made recipes can be offered. Through many years error correction has been an issue very debatable and yet nobody can say that it is an exhausted and completely explored issue. There is never ever only one way of getting things right. The best way of correction is that way that works with your students and has an impact on their improving performance.

The distinction between “errors” and “mistakes”

First of all let us try to clarify the meaning of the words ‘error’ and ‘mistake’. There are different definitions about errors and mistakes but the most accepted ones have been the following:

Errors reflect gaps in students’ knowledge. They occur because the student does not know what is correct. Pit Corder (1999) supports the idea that “errors are caused by ignorance of the appropriate rule or structure in the foreign language”.

Mistakes reflect occasional lapses in performance, confusion, slips of tongue, etc. They occur because in a particular instance, the student is unable to perform what he or she knows. “A mistake, according to Pit Corder (1999), is a problem not of knowing but of application”.

Consequently, mistakes are problems of applying incorrectly whereas errors are problems of knowledge, they are the result of incorrect rule learning; “learning has been stored in the brain incorrectly”. (Harmer, 1989)

Correction of the errors and mistakes helps both teacher and students correct written and oral work, analyze them and provide feedback. In order to analyze errors and mistakes it is very important to find the causes of errors and mistakes. From our observations, surveys and questionnaires we have noticed that some of the causes of making errors and mistakes are:

- Inadequacy of our teaching techniques
- Lack of hard work on the part of the learners
- The idea that we can’t learn a language without making mistakes, consequently errors will occur despite our best efforts
- More attention is given to the concern about teaching than improving the way of learning the foreign language
- The interference of the mother tongue (examples in phonology, word order, grammar, etc.)
- Overgeneralization (for example, overuse of the rules without focusing on exceptions as in the case of the “s” of plural, when the students wrongly say: child - childrens, foot – foots, etc)
- Carelessness, etc.

While researching this topic we asked about 12 teachers of English and 45 students of different levels. The first question was:

**Why do teachers correct?**

Here are some replies:

- To help students learn better
- To recognize students’ defects,
- To recognize gaps in students’ knowledge
- To tell mistakes from errors
- To check the consistency of students’ performance
- To see how the students have learned what they have been taught
- To check what the students know about the language
- To see the problems the students are having with the language
- Because the headmaster, the inspector ask them to do so
- To remedy students’ speaking and writing
- To help students self-correct and peer-correct
- To show that they care for students’ progress and they feel their responsibility
- To find the causes of errors
- To modify their correction policy
Sometimes it is easier to focus on what the students get wrong rather than on what they get right

Another question directed was: **Why don’t teachers correct?**

Surprisingly there were unexpected replies (from teachers and students):
- Because it is not an easy task
- Because it is hard work
- Because it needs a lot of time and energy
- Because we work under the pressure of time
- Sometimes it is time consuming, when correcting every bit of mistake
- Because they don’t care for students’ progress
- Because we think in this way we do not insult the students
- Because sometimes it is hard to identify, describe, explain and evaluate errors
- Because of carelessness
- Because of laziness
- Because some don’t feel like writing certain comments on students’ work
- To help students be fluent, not to discourage students
- Not to interrupt the students while speaking, not to discourage them
- Not to make a big fuss about mistakes
- Not to destroy the atmosphere in the class, not to stop the activity

**Correction techniques for written work**

Taking into consideration the replies of the teachers and students to the above two questions we come up with some suggestions for the teachers and students to help them use various techniques and procedures for error correction.

“Theories on correction are very diverse and at the same time very confusing. The teacher should make as little fuss as possible as far as correction is concerned.” (Tracy Terell, ‘Error Correction’ TESOL, 1977).

A very important and difficult task is the correction of the written work of the students, where the teachers should be very careful and caring.

**Why should we consider correcting written work?**

Correcting written work is a hard work for the teachers especially when they have to correct essays, compositions and have to write comments on content and format on the quality of the piece of writing. The correction of the written work, especially with comments, helps not only the students, but also the teachers improve their work in this direction. Correction of written work aims at focusing attention on accuracy and
We should try to shift the tendency of the teachers, who are over-preoccupied with accuracy. “This means that the student’s work is often covered with red ink and no comment is made about whether the work was interesting or successful”. (Jeremy Harmer, “The Practice of English Language Teaching”, Longman, 1989) To help teachers not only correct spelling, grammar, lexical and other mistakes but also provide certain comments on the content of the written work, showing the student where the work was effective and where it was not helps at the same time the quality growth of teachers and students learning and teaching English.

The following are some correction symbols that a lot of teachers use while correcting written work:

S – Spelling mistake
WO – Word Order
Gr – Grammar mistake
(VT – Verb Tense, S/P – Singular/Plural agreement, Mod – Modals, GI – Gerund/Infinitive, Com – Comparison, A/P – Active/Passive, Prep – Prepositions, etc.)
S/V – Subject/Verb agreement
Seg – Sentence Segment
^ - Something is missing
WW – Wrong Word
P – Punctuation
C – Capital letter
Inc. – Incomplete sentence
? – Not clear, what do you intend to mean

There might be other symbols that teachers use while correcting written work. Not all of these are used at the same time; it depends on what is taught in the curriculum at the moment and what the teacher intends to correct. One of the most important things to start using these correction symbols is to make the students understand them and take them seriously.

Procedures to help teachers to correct written work

There are different procedures to help teachers to correct written work. Let us look at some of them:

1. The correction of all the mistakes

This is a traditional procedure for the correction of the mistakes in a written work. But it
is a waste of time for the teacher and a discouragement for the student if they receive their work full of red notes. Some students learn nothing from this, see their notebook red and leave it away.

2. The correction of the mistakes selectively

This procedure presupposes that the teacher corrects not all the mistakes but only those that the teacher has decided to focus on, for example, the tenses of the verbs, articles, etc. Certainly this procedure has more positive effects than the total correction, because the teacher focuses on a certain issue that he thinks the students need more. This way is more practical and more effective if the teacher has clear objectives.

3. Underline the mistakes; write the nature of the mistake, the student has to correct them

This procedure is mainly done through symbols mentioned above to help the students focus their attention on the type of the mistake and think about how to correct it. It involves the student in correction and helps the teacher to find if the mistakes done by the students are errors or simply slips of pen. The symbols should be clear and meaningful. Before using them the teachers should explain the symbols to the students, till they become natural to their work.

Using the list of symbols the students can work individually, in pairs or in small groups. They may identify themselves some of the mistakes; in case of need they may consult the teacher. This procedure makes the students more self-conscious of their mistakes and the correction might be more effective and fruitful. The teacher might use several phases to correct the written work using this procedure:

- **First phase** - underline the mistakes and write the right symbol in the margin on the same line.
- **Second phase** - underline the mistake and do not write the symbol. This helps the students find the type of the mistake themselves.
- **Third phase**, write the symbol on the margin, next to the line where the mistake is, but do not show exactly where the mistake is, and show only the line. This helps the student find the mistake, helped by the symbol put on the margin.
- **Fourth phase**, put a cross (X) on the margin, put as many crosses as mistakes are in a line. The students will find the mistake and the type, knowing how many mistakes are in one line.
- **Fifth phase**, put a cross next to the line in the margin, but do not show how many mistakes are. This is a more difficult way of correction, it makes the students think about mistakes, knowing that there is something wrong in a particular line.
4. The teachers may leave the students find their own mistakes

Leaving to students a certain amount of time to find and correct their mistakes develops what is sometimes called self-correction. This may be done when the teacher has time to correct the mistakes in the class and to discuss them. It is effective but difficult to be applied. There are cases when the students enjoy this type of correction and work seriously. While using this procedure the teacher may help the students through explaining the mistake, on the margin. This is done to attract the attention of the students for the type of the mistakes and for repeated mistakes. This also may be done when the teacher has time to discuss the mistakes in the class. Even the writing that the student needs to consult the teacher for some mistakes may be used as an alternative, not to be monotonous, using the general mistakes to improve teacher’s and students’ work. This procedure may be used if a considerable number of students have made the same mistake, thus attracting the attention of the students for a general mistake.

The correction in this way may improve the presentation of the new lesson. There are cases that the teachers use only one way of correction, because they get used to it, it is easier and are swamped by routine. There are also teachers that do not accept the self-correction procedure. Anyway we can not say this is wrong and this is right. We may only offer alternatives for the correction procedures and let the teachers choose what they think is more suitable in their work.

The procedure of self-correction helps the students develop critical thinking towards their written work. Every the teacher selects on his own the procedures of correcting the mistakes according to the interests and needs of his students.

“There is a general agreement among researchers that having the teacher correct every error on students’ written work is not the most useful way of providing corrective feedback. This approach is time consuming and resembles editing more than it does correcting. Students may seem extremely discouraged if their papers are continually to them with so many red marks as there are words on a page. There is also good reason to believe that by supplying the corrections themselves, teachers might actually be hindering the students’ progress in building proficiency in writing”. (Pit Corder, “The Significance of Learner’s Errors”, 1999)

How to correct a written work through questions – an Activity

Ask the students to write a composition “My native town”. They bring the task to the teacher to evaluate it. Let’s see an example.

The name of the student _________________________________
I am from Belesh. Belshi is located about 40 km south Elbasan. It is a small town, the smallest in my prefecture. The climate is mild and humid. Belesh is a quiet and a very beautiful place. It is famous for its fish. There is also a department store in it, a high school and two elementary schools. People like to play sport, go fishing, climbing, etc.

Let’s see some teacher’s comments through questions:

Mira (See, the teacher directs the student in her first name), your town seems very interesting. I have some ideas to help you revise your composition and add more details to it: Try to write your composition in paragraphs, what might come first and what second? Can you explain the idea further? Can you describe the location of your town more? Where do people go climbing? I think that your town must be next to a river or a lake, but you did not say so. Is there a lake there or a river near by? (As you mention fish and fishing) What is it like? Do you swim there? What kinds of fish do people catch? What about the flowers and trees?

Note: I am looking forward to learning more about your town.

Well, you may think the teachers can not do all these. It is true that all this is hard work and it takes a lot of time. If you really want to help your students to improve their language skills, you have to give them a chance. You have not to do this all the time, but try once at a time and enable your students to do it through peer correction.

Some clues to correct student’s oral communication

- Establish a positive relationship with students
- Don’t interrupt often to correct while the student is speaking if the meaning is conveyed
- Use such words, not bad, much better, nice going, one more time and you will have it, you mean …, you wanted to say that …, I didn’t really catch what you meant …, can you repeat it again …, that’s not half bad …, you have just about got it, think again, you have missed something, try again,
- Use positive recognition to keep students speaking
- Don’t use derogatory words
- Don’t overcorrect
- Don’t do insensitive correction
- Try to use gentle correction, showing the student that something is wrong, don’t make a big fuss about it, saying, well that’s not quite right, we don’t say…. But we say this …,
- Use positive recognition to keep students speaking
Some advice for correction in general

- Sit down and correct without laziness
- Do not work under the pressure of time
- Concentrate on the main issues that help the students to improve their work and performance for the future issues
- Give the opportunity to the student to overlook his work
- Do not write harsh written comments or no comments at all.
- Written comments is good to be followed by short discussions
- Give time to students to ask for the written comments
- Change the code of correction according to the level of the students, time you have at your disposal, type of mistakes, aim of correction, etc.
- Do some preparatory work before the students begin to write, this reduces the number of mistakes
- Share experiences with other teachers as far as error correction is concerned
- Offer to the students practical and clear comments, specific suggestions to improve their work
- Be positive and constructive in your comments, there is always something good in a student’s work
- Before using the symbol code, explain it clearly to the students
- Plan to spend the necessary time in the class for self-correction
- Do not use scrubs, do not cross out whole paragraphs, write clearly, possibly write with a different pen, not always red, as the students are tired of red notes. The student’s work should not be a mess at the end of correction. Try not to write over student’s writing
- Try to be positive while writing comments, for example:
  - Your work is expressive, challenging, vital
  - Well chosen vocabulary, natural, everyday life,
  - The sentences and paragraphs are effective
  - Generally good, well, (implying not perfect)
  - Your handwriting is not quite clear, understandable, etc. etc.
  - You may add others and others

Conclusion

Whatever procedure we use in correcting oral or written work of our students, we the teachers should bear in mind that we should allow students time to identify their mistakes and to correct them. “In this way the teacher is acting as a resource and can help where students do not know what is wrong” (Harmer, 1989). Positive feedback on students’ oral or written performance is a strong push towards the continuous improvement of learners of English. Helping the students establish confidence and self-esteem is one
of the most important contributions we have made to the new teachers and student teachers to be successful in their future career.

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