

Are you sometimes unsure about when you should correct your students' spoken language? Do you feel that you always correct them in the same way? This lesson looks at the types of errors students make with oral language and it outlines a procedure and some techniques for dealing with these.

#### Task 1 – Was that an error or a slip of the tongue?

**Andy:** "I corrected this student of mine in class the other day. She left out an article, so I interrupted her and told her she needed to add 'the'. She got quite annoyed with me and told me that she knew all about articles. However, in the next breath she was telling me she wants to be corrected more."



**Who has the problem – Andy or his student? Why do you think this? Jot down your answers on a note pad, then check the answer key below.** 🗝️

#### Task 1 Feedback

The student does seem 🗝️ be sending slightly contradictory messages to Andy. However, Andy's intervention may have been untimely and interrupted the student's flow of conversation. The key issue here is that knowing when to correct is a sensitive judgment call for teachers. Students do want feedback on their language, but they like to get it at the right time.

#### Key Skill

An important distinction to make is the one between systematic errors and mistakes or slips. Systematic errors are indicative of a student's lack of language knowledge, while small mistakes or slips occur in language that students know, but lack of concentration or tiredness can mean they make a mistake.

Task 2 – Types of errors



Numbers 1 to 5 are examples of spoken errors. Letters a to e are categories of errors. Number i to v indicate what the problem is. Match the examples to the categories and problems.

Example	Category	Problem
1. "I will to the party go."		
2. "My sister is higher than my brother."		
3. "I went to a barty and danced all night."		
4. A: "Do you like wine?" B: "No thank you."		
5. Customer in a café: "Give me a coffee."		

**Categories**

- a. pronunciation
- b. pragmatic (language in context)
- c. grammar
- d. vocabulary
- e. discourse

**Problems**

- i. collocation
- ii. cohesion
- iii. register too informal
- iv. sound (phoneme)
- v. word order

Check your ideas in the answer key.



**Key Skill**

The causes of error stem from the students' lack of knowledge. This can be a result of having learnt rules incorrectly or oversimplifying a rule they have learnt. A student's first language can play a role in the cause of error, particularly with pronunciation errors. Some errors are the result of a student being creative with the limited English they do have in order to communicate.

Task 3 – A procedure for correcting errors



Letters a to j below outline ten steps in a procedure for correcting students errors. Place the steps in the correct order.

Steps	Order? [1-10]
a. If that’s not successful, other students can be asked to correct the language.	
b. Alternatively, the teacher may wait until the activity is finished then correct errors.	
c. Another approach is to record students as they carry out a speaking activity and get them to correct themselves when they listen to the recording.	
d. The first decision the teacher has to make is whether to correct the error, or just let it go by.	
e. If no-one can help, then the teacher should give the correct version of the language.	
f. The teacher hears the error and categorizes it in their head.	
g. However, the teacher may decide to correct the language after the speaking activity by noting down errors and then writing them up on the white board for the students to correct.	
h. Either way, the error (or errors) needs to be pointed out to students.	
i. If the teacher decides to, on-the-spot error correction could be done, to deal with the error immediately.	
j. When the teacher does on-the-spot correction, the student who made the error needs to have the opportunity to self correct, first of all.	

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

**Key Skill**

Teachers are more likely to do on-the-spot error correction during accuracy-focused activities such as clarifying new language and controlled oral practice of new language. Delayed feedback on errors is more likely to take place after freer practice or spoken fluency activities.

Task 4 – Correction techniques



Letters a to f below describe different correction techniques. Put them in order from 1 *least directive* (i.e. the teacher does little to point out that an error has been made and does not indicate where and what the problem is) to 6 *most directive* (i.e. the teacher very clearly indicates the place and nature of the error).

The student error is: *'I have gone to the movies yesterday.'*

Correction technique	How directive? [1 – 6]
a. The teacher repeats the student's error with a rising intonation and perhaps a quizzical facial expression.	
b. The teacher says: <i>It was yesterday – exact time – what's correct?</i>	
c. The teacher says: <i>So do we use present perfect or past simple?</i>	
d. The teacher says: <i>Think about the grammar – the verb.</i>	
e. The teacher spells out the utterance on their fingers, highlights the fingers that represent 'have gone' and says the word 'tense'.	
f. The teacher recasts the student's utterance without expression: <i>Oh so you went to the movies yesterday.</i>	

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

#### Thinking about your teaching ...

Student errors are an interesting insight into learners' interlanguage (the current state of a learner's language). This keeps changing and developing as their level of ability increases. It can be interesting to do a detailed study of one learner's interlanguage. Collect as many samples as you can from the learner by listening carefully to them in class and perhaps by asking permission to record them speaking. You might be able to add written errors to your collection. What do these errors tell you about this learner? What do they tell you about learners at this level? (i.e. are some of the errors familiar?)

Note your conclusions in your *Teaching Log*.

#### Taking it to the classroom ...

The best way of finding out if you are correcting enough is by asking your students. You can do this directly or you can give them a simple survey. It might be interesting to explore the idea of a 'correction contract'. You and the students formally agree when you should correct and what kinds of errors you correct.

#### Want to find out more ... ?

Pages 137 to 138 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4th edition)* by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007) has an introduction to why learners make errors and mistakes.

Pages 288 to 292 of *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom* by Tricia Hedge (Oxford University Press 2000) contains extra reading on errors and error correction.

Pages 298 to 302 of *Learning Teaching (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005) contains extra reading on different kinds of errors and discussion of on-the-spot correction techniques.

#### Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to this topic:

- Unit 2 h) Correcting written language: *a useful follow-up to this lesson, dealing with error correction of students' writing.*
- Unit 2 f) Conducting feedback on classroom activities: *discusses a different ways to approach feedback after tasks and activities.*

### Answer Key



#### Task 2 – Feedback

- 1) c, v
- 2) d, i
- 3) a, iv
- 4) e, ii
- 5) b, iii

#### Task 3 – Feedback

- 1) f
- 2) d
- 3) i
- 4) b
- 5) h
- 6) j
- 7) a
- 8) e
- 9) g
- 10) c

#### Task 4 – Feedback

1. **f.** *Comment: The teacher does almost nothing to indicate that an error has been made.*

2. **a.** *Comment: The teacher indicates that there is something wrong with the utterance, but does not say what the problems is.*

3. **d.** *Comment: The teacher is slightly more specific and indicates that the problem is grammar and not vocabulary or pronunciation.*

4. **b.** *Comment: The teacher clearly indicates that time reference is the problem and therefore the verb form needs correcting.*

5. **e.** *Comment: The teacher clearly points out where the error is and explicitly states that there is a problem with the verb form.*

6. **c.** *Comment: The teacher is specific about the fact the verb form is incorrect and tells the student how to correct it. This approach assumes that the student knows grammar terminology.*