

Examining correction

Doreen Spiteri

Teachers correct. That is part of our job and an integral part of it too. However some teachers might feel that this is the one aspect of the job that they dread and find most disheartening. Why don't students learn? Why do they make the same mistakes¹ we find ourselves asking? Some other questions we might like to put to ourselves are: does correcting really do students any good? What happens to the corrections we make? Can anything be done to break the deadlock of unheeded corrections?

“Why don't students learn? Why do they make the same mistakes we find ourselves asking?”

This article looks at the thinking and values that underlie our practice of correcting and suggests looking at correction as a form of continuous assessment that is of value for both teacher and learner. A suggestion is made for this to be done more efficiently both in terms of teacher-time and learning potential. For reasons of space I will only look at correcting extended writing.

Why we do the things we do

Teachers' reactions to mistakes differ. Some feel they should correct every mistake, others might turn a blind eye to many, while others still might select mistakes common to many students and discuss these in class. Different attitudes that have one thing in common: they reflect our implicit and explicit beliefs about ourselves as language teachers and about the nature of language learning in general. And these reasons go to the core of what it is that we do in class. Our reaction to students' mistakes therefore bears some reflection.

As teachers we might see ourselves as givers of all information, as the ones with the corrections to students' mistakes. Therefore we conscientiously correct the incorrect and cross out, underline, re-write, refine. We may be reluctant to do otherwise because we feel we are sending students the wrong feedback if mistakes are left uncorrected. We may in fact see ourselves as promoters of accuracy and desire learners to reach that goal. We might also be using our ability to correct as a form of pressure to reinforce the power divide between us and the learners, or give learners the impression of doing so.

Another set of assumptions that may underlie our attitude are those related to the nature of language learning. We may consciously or unconsciously believe that learning is a straightforward process: teachers teach, learners learn. This implies a belief that what has been learnt cannot be forgotten, that learners build continuously on prior knowledge and that they will pick up on the point corrected and not do it again.

So far I have made the point that whatever we do as teachers is underpinned by a theory which may be principled or otherwise, and explicit or otherwise. For this reason some

clarifications need to be made with regards to the preceding paragraph.

The process of building on what one has learnt does take place to an extent; however, language learning is not solely linear and additive. It is also cyclical, and learnt structures and vocabulary can be forgotten if the learning process does not make them memorable and the passage from the short-term to the long-term memory does not take place. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into methodological issues though clearly these are the crux of the matter.

Regarding the other set of assumptions dealing with our self-perception as teachers, we might wish to see ourselves as informed facilitators who promote learner independence and autonomy rather than the providers of knowledge.

The heart of the matter

The question remains: What does one do? How much to correct? What works, what does not?

A basic tenet that should be stated at this point with regards to correction is that the work we assign should be related to the teaching that preceded it. If students are assessed on material they have just covered, this should go some way towards reducing our correction load.

Back to our problem: How best to correct? It is a question that has more than one answer because it is dependent on some factors: how old are the students? How long have they been studying English? What level of proficiency have they reached? How motivated are they? What purpose are they learning English for? Answers to these questions should guide our practice and we should bring our professional judgement to bear on the issue.

One thing is certain, extensive correction and copious re-writing strike a deadly blow to motivation and confidence that return to plague us because unmotivated and indifferent learners we can well do without.

Correction code

One way of correcting which allows teachers to fulfil their role and encourage learners to take some responsibility for their learning is to use a code. It is a simple strategy and work like this. In the margin on the students' written work, the teacher notes the



DOREEN SPITERI is currently reading for a doctorate in assessing linguistic proficiency at the University of London, where she graduated with a Masters degree in TESOL. Her research interests lie in language assessment, methodology and teacher education

type of mistake, and, optionally, marks where the mistake lies. For example:

| | |
|------|--|
| sp p | On friday, afternoons |
| | I take care of |
| voc | my small sister. My mother thinks I am |
| sp | responsible enough now that I |
| gr | have thirteen |
| ↑ | years ↑. |

A code can include the following and can be modified to suit both teachers' and learners' needs.

- gr = grammar
- () = unnecessary words
- w.o. = word order
- p = punctuation
- t = tense
- prep = preposition
- voc = vocabulary
- ↑ = word missing
- sp = spelling
- // = start fresh paragraph
- rep = repetition

Putting it in action

The work is returned to the student who uses a dictionary or the class textbook, or checks with other students (through pair work or group work) to solve the problems pointed out by the teacher. The teacher is the last resort.

The dynamics of this will need to be adjusted to the particular classroom situation. This stage where students attempt to correct their own mistakes can be carried out in class while the teacher moves from desk to desk

guiding students. Alternatively the students can do this at home.

For assessment purposes we would then need to decide how to assign a mark. We could mark the work first time round with a preliminary mark, and a second time after it has been revised. This can have the benefit of students seeing their mark raised if they manage to put right most of their mistakes.

Marks can also be withheld until the finished product is handed in.

If we embark on the use of such a code, this should be explained to students and probably they will need to copy it down in their composition or writing copybooks for easy reference. The use of such a code does not cover all that we may wish to correct, but it does get a lot of the mechanical mistakes out of the way. It does not for instance work for unidiomatic phrases and sentences. For example, a phrase like she jumped for her head (she dived into the sea) cannot be broken down into bits but the whole phrase will need to be marked off and shown as incorrect and probably the correct lexis provided by the teacher.

Moreover, with low level learners of English whose work will contain a fearful number of mistakes and errors, the code might be overwhelming. In such cases it is best to focus on some of the problems at a time rather than attempt to correct everything that is wrong. In this way we set limited learning objectives each time.

There is also the issue of how often will the teacher look at the same piece of writing. Some thinking and planning will need to be done so that correction loads will not be staggering.

Conclusion

There are however a number of advantages in using a code namely, it:

- ✓ is less time-consuming for teachers
- ✓ encourages study skills in learners and promotes use of resources
- ✓ develops the skills of editing and drafting
- ✓ encourages students to focus on mistakes
- ✓ is motivating especially if work is marked after the student has revised own work
- ✓ provides feedback to teachers regarding effectiveness of teaching.

Endnote

¹It is customary to define "mistake" as something the learner knows but has not put into practice. On the other hand, an 'error' is made when the learner attempts something and gets it wrong.

References

- Bartram, M. and R. Walton, (1994), Correction, Language Teaching Publications.
- Ellis, R. (1997), Second Language Acquisition, OUP.

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Photo taken at Sir Adrian Dingli Junior Lyceum by Alfred Cauchi