

Correcting students' speaking

Students make mistakes for a whole number of complex reasons. As teachers, we need to view error not as an opportunity for punitive correction and ever more grammar practice, but rather as an opportunity to work from where learners are at and to expand outwards from this point.

Many seemingly grammatical errors are actually the result of lexical deficiencies and that what is needed is NOT more grammar correction and study, but rather more lexical input. Students who do not know the easiest way of saying something have to construct much longer expressions and do more grammaticalisation. If students are unable to access the collocations or fixed expressions they need - and, lest we forget, these are often the most concise, condensed ways of expressing many ideas - they are then left needing to do much more work. They, therefore, run a much higher risk of making mistakes than the speaker who can use a precise lexical phrase. For instance, if you don't know the expression: 'It boosted team morale,' you have to construct something like the following, which one of my Upper-Intermediate students recently came out with: 'It went to make the feeling and the spirit of the team go up.' Similarly, if you don't know 'a revised edition,' you may well end up with 'a new book that is quite similar with an old book, but had been improved and more up-to-date' !!

As such, the latter 'error' could be seen as a chance to teach not only 'a revised edition,' but also other connected lexical items such as 'a remake of an old movie,' 'the director's cut of an old movie' and 'a cover version of an old song.'

Students need to be encouraged to believe that errors are normal, natural and inevitable, and to not worry about making them whilst speaking. Teachers can often reformulate what learners are saying as they respond to them, as in the following exchange:

Student: *I didn't make my homework the night yesterday.*
Teacher: *Oh, you didn't DO your homework LAST NIGHT? How come?*

Little bits of this often encourage students to listen more carefully to our Teacher Talking Time (TTT), which becomes a more conscious kind of input. It also shows students we still understand them even when they make mistakes and that normal human-to-human conversation is still possible, even whilst errors are being covertly tackled.

You may have already come across the legendary story of the bad teacher who has a student whose mother has broken her leg. This story is sometimes presented as an example of how NOT to teach and - by extension - how not to talk to or correct our students. The offending conversation goes something like this:

Student: *Sorry I no come class yesterday. My mum, she breaked the leg.*
Teacher: *Breaked?*
Student: *Yes, breaked.*
Teacher: *No, it's broke. It's irregular.*
Student: *Oh, yes. My mum, she broke the leg.*
Teacher: *Good.*

This little exchange is presumably followed by something like: "Now open your books at

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Page 41 and try Exercise Two.” Clearly, this kind of teaching is not something to be encouraged. However, the problem is that which alternative approach we opt for instead. It seems that to many of the *Communicative Language Teaching* generation, the solution is simply something along these lines:

Student: *Sorry I no come class. My mum she brokek the leg.*
Teacher: *Oh no! That’s awful. I’m so sorry to hear that. Anyway, open your books at page forty-one. Let’s look at some grammar, shall we?*

Simply being nice to our students doesn’t really get us that much further! Sure, it might make those in our classrooms less likely to dislike us, but it certainly doesn’t mean we’re teaching them anything. Instead, we need to find a balance between a humanistic focusing on our learners as real people and a pragmatic language-oriented TEACHING focus. Below is one example of how this can be realised in the classroom through teacher talking time and reformulated correction:

S: *Sorry I no come class yesterday. My mum, she brokek the leg.*
T: *Oh no! Your mum BROKE her leg!*
S: *Yes.*
T: *Is she all right?*
S: *Mmm . . . er . . . no good. They put . . . er . . . er . . . band . . .*
T: **They put a bandage on?**
S: *Yes, bandage.*
T: *Is it hard, like this?*
S: *Yes, yes.*
T: *Oh right, so that’s not a bandage, then. They PUT IT IN PLASTER. How long has she got to have it on for?*
S: *Sorry?*
T: *How long has she got to have it on for? (writes this question on the board). Two weeks? Three weeks? What?*
S: *Six weeks.*
T: *Six weeks! What a pain! Can she walk?*
S: *Now no. Two weeks in bed.*
T: *Oh, right. She’s GOT TO SPEND TWO WEEKS IN BED! What a drag. Well, if you need to take more time off, don’t worry, yeah?*
S: *OK, thank you. What did you say this was? (demonstrates)*
T: *Plaster. THEY PUT IT IN PLASTER. SHE HAS TO HAVE IT IN PLASTER FOR SIX WEEKS. (writes this on the board).*
S2: *And the other - bandage?*
T: *BANDage (T drills this). And what’s the difference between a bandage and in plaster?*
S2: *Hard.*
T: *Yeah, OK. Which one?*
S: *Plaster.*
T: *So why would you put on a bandage?*
S3: *Cut.*
T: *Yeah, OK. THAT’S A REALLY NASTY CUT - YOU’D BETTER PUT A BANDAGE ON IT. (Writes both sentences on the board). Any other reasons?*
S4: *Play football (points to knee)*

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- T: *Oh, yeah. That's happened to me, actually. I injured my knee a few years ago, so now I wear a bandage on my knee when I play - just to support it.*
- S5: *My dictionary says plaster is this* (points to a picture of a band-aid in the dictionary)
- T: *Oh right, yeah, OK. Well, if you PUT A PLASTER ON, then you mean that kind of plaster, but if they PUT IT IN PLASTER - not A plaster - then it means you broke a bone. (T points to the expression written on the board). In this sentence here, who's THEY?*
- S7: *Doctors*
- T: *Exactly. Actually, with plaster, you're most likely to say 'HAVE YOU GOT A PLASTER? I'VE CUT MYSELF.'* (writes this on the board). *What would the other person say?*

There are several interesting things going on in this extract. Firstly, the teacher is working from chatting and empathy towards language teaching, and then back again. The teacher repeatedly switches from asking about the student's mother to looking at, and correcting, language. Secondly, the teacher just doesn't TELL the student, or the class, information about the language looked at. Rather, the teacher manages to work outwards from one student's concerns into areas that are useful for all the students in the class. By asking questions like 'What's the difference between a bandage and in plaster?' and 'Why would you put on a bandage?' the teacher is not only getting at connected language and other useful expressions around the subject, but is also bringing the whole group into the conversation and pooling their knowledge. There are other things going on here too, having elicited language from the students, the teacher expertly reformulates their utterances: thus covertly correcting and encouraging the students to keep listening as they'll get to hear how to say what they're trying to say in better English. So, for instance, right at the beginning of the exchange, when the student reveals "My mum, she broke the leg," the teacher responds in a very humane, sympathetic way, but also, through stressing the voice, makes it clear that while the message has been received and responded to, the linguistic wrapper has been retouched and given a make-over. Correction has occurred. On top of all this, the teacher is also using the board to give students a record of how they can use these lexical items in future, how they're commonly used.

This approach to error manages to be inclusive and accepting, whilst also making it clear to students where mistakes have been made, and supplying them with the easiest, more direct way of saying what they have been trying to say.

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