ERROR CORRECTION

Types and sources of errors, when to correct, techniques and who corrects

Introduction

Error correction is the set of strategies a teacher, or another more knowledgeable person, uses to point out and try to repair a learner's incorrect production: spoken or written language that doesn't follow accepted norms of usage. It is part of feedback (information about performance), and is often called **corrective feedback**.

Error correction has sparked considerable **debate**. Some argue that correction can be counterproductive and hinder learning; others say it is necessary for learning to take place. However, well-suited and well-timed correction has been observed to have **positive** effects, at least in the long term. Teachers also use correction to track progress, and many learners expect it.

Not all errors are the same. They can be classified in three ways.

Based on	Category	Description	Example
Cause	**Error**	caused by lack of knowledge (*competence*); learners can't correct it themselves	
	Mistake (or *slip*)	caused by distraction, pressure, etc. (*performance*); learners can correct it once it is pointed out	
Impact	**Global error**	gets in the way of understanding	*I have be no English class.*
	Local error	doesn't affect communication	*She like study English.*
Source	**Interlingual error**	caused by interference from the learner's first language (L1)	
	Intralingual error	caused by the learner's developing knowledge of the target language	

In this handout, "error" and "mistake" are used interchangeably because, in practice, it is often hard to tell them apart, unless you know a learner very well or the learner has a chance to self-correct.

> **TEACHING TIP**
> Don't leave errors unattended altogether: corrective feedback is considered a useful part of second language acquisition. At the same time, don't overestimate its impact: correction doesn't necessarily lead to repair.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Error correction (corrective feedback) is a form of feedback on learners' incorrect production.
- Views on its usefulness differ, but well-suited and well-timed correction is generally considered beneficial in the long term.
- Errors reflect lack of knowledge, whereas mistakes reflect performance factors. In practice, the two are hard to tell apart.
- Errors can be classified by their impact on comprehension (global or local) and by their source (interlingual or intralingual).

Sources of errors

These are common sources of learner errors. Most are processes that produce errors. The last one, fossilisation, describes what happens when errors become permanent.

Source	Description	Example
Interference	using elements from one language to produce another	*I bought a new book at the **library**.* (meaning "bookshop", from Spanish *librería*)
Overgeneralisation	forming unknown forms according to the patterns of known forms	*She **buyed** a new house.*
Ignorance of rule restrictions	applying rules to contexts where they don't apply	*We discussed **about** the problem.*
Incompleteness	producing incomplete forms	*Where **you come** from?*
False hypotheses	forming language based on wrong assumptions about the target language (TL)	*He **was go** on holiday.*
Hypercorrection	replacing a correct form in an attempt to sound more formal or correct	*Between you and **I**...*
Simplification	producing simplified versions of correct forms	*He **go** to work by bus.*
Avoidance	avoiding a form perceived as too difficult and using another one instead	A learner who finds the present perfect difficult asks *How long **are you living** here?*
Incorrect instruction	producing incorrect forms because of incorrect input from teachers, classmates, materials, etc.	
Fossilisation	producing incorrect forms that have become a permanent part of the learner's *interlanguage* (see below)	

A learner's **interlanguage** is the unique grammatical system they develop while acquiring a language. It is constantly evolving. When it stops evolving in a particular area, the learner keeps making the same errors: this is **fossilisation** (or stabilisation).

More broadly, errors can be grouped as **interference errors** (interlingual) and **developmental errors** (intralingual). It was once commonly assumed that most errors came from **negative transfer** from the learner's L1. More recent research shows that many errors are developmental: learners with different first languages often go through similar stages and make similar errors.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Errors have many possible sources, including interference, overgeneralisation, false hypotheses, hypercorrection, simplification and avoidance.
- Fossilisation is not a source but a state in which the same errors persist.
- Errors can be grouped as interference (interlingual) or developmental (intralingual).
- Many errors are developmental, so learners with different first languages often make similar errors.

Types of errors

Learners can make **grammar** or **vocabulary** errors that affect **meaning**, **form**, **pronunciation** and/or **appropriacy** (whether the language is socially and culturally appropriate for the context). Here are some examples, each with a brief evaluation.

Error	Type	Aspect	Evaluation
*I've **visited** Japan last year.*	Grammar	Meaning	Wrong tense for a completed action at a stated past time. The present perfect is formed correctly, but it expresses a different meaning.
*I have dinner **always** at 8 pm.*	Grammar	Form	Wrong word order. Meaning is not affected.
*A coffee **is wanted by me**.*	Grammar	Appropriacy	A correct structure (the passive) used where it isn't needed. It sounds unnatural.
*She's **embarrassed** with a third child.*	Vocabulary	Meaning	A false friend: Spanish *embarazada* means "pregnant". Meaning is compromised.
*She invested **on** the property market.*	Vocabulary	Form	Wrong preposition in the collocation *invest in*. Meaning is not affected.
*I don't really like **vegeTAbles**.*	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Stress on the wrong syllable (it should be *VEGetables*). Meaning is not affected.
[In a restaurant] ***Gimme** this!*	Vocabulary	Appropriacy	An inappropriate way to make a request. The learner may sound impolite.

Appropriacy is often overlooked. Corrections of grammatical form are common, but comments on the social or cultural appropriacy of what learners say or write are rare. Learners are often unaware that a change in intonation can signal a different attitude and sound impolite, or that a wrong word can come across as rude.

TEACHING TIP

Pay attention to errors of meaning, form, pronunciation and appropriacy, and prioritise them according to the context. Give priority to competence errors (caused by lack of knowledge) over performance mistakes (caused by stress, fatigue, time pressure, etc.).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Errors can be classified by type (grammar or vocabulary) and by the aspect they affect (meaning, form, pronunciation or appropriacy).
- Errors that affect meaning usually matter more than errors that affect form alone.
- Appropriacy errors are often overlooked but can make a learner sound impolite or inappropriate.

Treatment of errors

Error correction can be a dilemma, as decisions about the type of error, whether to correct, timing, techniques and who corrects can be difficult to make.

The process starts with identifying the **type of error**. This relies on your language awareness and knowledge of the language system. Teachers often avoid correcting because, although they know something is wrong, they aren't sure how to explain why if learners ask.

Deciding whether to correct

Next, decide whether the correction is **useful**. Traditionally, teachers correct errors that:

- ☐ affect the general meaning and intelligibility of what is said or written
- ☐ are closely related to the pedagogical focus of the lesson
- ☐ are repeated systematically
- ☐ are made by most of the class
- ☐ may lead to the learner being mocked or stigmatised by others

Errors made under **pressure to perform** (slips) tend to be less serious, and teachers often ignore them. The same applies to errors made when learners try to produce language above their level, as they are unlikely to be able to repair them.

Also consider the **affective** impact of correction. It would be counterproductive and insensitive to correct a shy or less confident learner who is trying to express themselves, or a learner sharing something with emotional significance. Remember the human side of the classroom and use your judgement.

TEACHING TIP

Not all errors should be corrected. Focused correction (of specific errors) is believed to be more effective than unfocused correction (of all errors). Consider the emotional impact of correction, especially in public: it can affect some learners' motivation and confidence and cause unnecessary anxiety. Where possible, find out how your learners feel about correction and adapt to their needs and wants.

Timing

There is no consensus on whether **immediate** corrective feedback (during an activity) or **delayed** corrective feedback (after it) is more effective. Traditionally, immediate feedback is favoured in **accuracy-focused** activities, and delayed feedback after **fluency-focused** activities, to avoid interrupting

communication. In delayed feedback, you observe quietly, note relevant errors and give feedback after the activity.

However, there is theoretical support for immediate feedback during fluency activities too. Learners engaged in meaningful communication may be better able to notice gaps in their knowledge and more open to changes in their language system (their *interlanguage*), and the correction itself may be more meaningful. If you correct during fluency work, keep it brief and unobtrusive.

ONLINE CLASSES

Delayed feedback is easy to manage: note errors in a document while learners speak, then share it on screen. Immediate feedback may work better in the chat or through gestures, as spoken interruptions are more disruptive on a call.

TEACHING TIP

Different stages of a lesson call for different attention to errors. An accuracy-focused stage generally needs more repair work than a fluency-focused one, but corrective feedback has a place in both.

Techniques

These are some well-established correction techniques. For each one, imagine a learner made this mistake when describing a businessman: *He's richest man in the world!*

Technique	Description and example
Clarification request	Act as if you haven't understood and ask the learner to repeat. *Sorry, what did you say? Can you repeat that, please?*
Repetition	Repeat exactly what the learner said, with rising intonation. *He's RICHEST man in the world?*
Partial repetition	Repeat what the learner said up to the error. *He's...*
Elicitation	Tell the learner there is a mistake and encourage them to correct it. *Good try! There's a mistake in your sentence. Can you try again?*
Metalinguistic clue	Use grammatical terms to help the learner find the mistake. *It's a superlative. What do we need before the adjective?*
Options	Offer a choice to prompt the correction. *He's richest, the richest or a richest man?*
Doubt question	Question the accuracy of what the learner said. *Do we say "He's richest man"?*
Facial expression or gesture	Show that something isn't quite right by frowning, wobbling your hand, etc., perhaps with a hum (*Mmm...*), and encourage the learner to try again.
Finger correction	Ask the learner to repeat while you use one finger for each word to locate the mistake. *He (thumb) 's (index) ... (middle finger: wiggle it to show something is missing) richest (ring finger) man (little finger).*
Board work	Write all or part of the sentence on the board so the learner can see the mistake and correct it. Gapped sentences, timelines, etc. can also help.
Reformulation (recast)	Repeat the sentence correctly, perhaps stressing the correction. *Yes, I know. He's THE richest man in the world.*

Technique	Description and example
Explicit correction	Point out the mistake and give the correct form. *There's a mistake in your sentence. You should say: He's the richest man in the world.*
Follow-up questions	Ask a follow-up question that encourages the learner to use the language again. *Really? What else is he? Is he the most powerful?*
Ignore the error	Don't react to the mistake; note it down for delayed feedback.

Adapted from Lyster & Ranta (1997)

Some techniques are **explicit**: the learner is told about the error and encouraged to repair it (e.g. explicit correction, metalinguistic clues, elicitation). Others are **implicit**: the learner isn't told about the error but may notice and repair it (e.g. recasts, clarification requests).

Both can help acquisition, but explicit correction is believed to be better at helping learners notice gaps in their knowledge. Explicit correction tends to suit accuracy-focused activities, and implicit correction fluency-focused ones.

Techniques can also be grouped by what they ask learners to do.

	Input-providing	Output-prompting
What happens	the teacher gives the correct form	the learner has to produce the correct form
Examples	recasts, explicit correction	elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, repetition, gestures
Pros	quick; learners hear an accurate model	involves learners actively; promotes noticing and self-repair
Cons	less effort from learners; may go unnoticed, especially when implicit	takes more time; only works if learners know the correct form

As with explicit and implicit techniques, the choice depends on the error, the learner and the stage of the lesson.

ONLINE CLASSES

Most techniques work as they do face to face. Gestures and finger correction need your hands to be visible on camera, and board work can be done on a shared screen, a digital whiteboard or in the chat.

TEACHING TIP

Try implicit feedback first and, if it doesn't work, move to more explicit techniques. Starting light gives learners the chance to notice and repair the error themselves, and moving to explicit techniques makes sure the error is eventually dealt with.

TEACHING TIP

Make sure learners know they are being corrected, and give them enough thinking time to repair what they said. If they can't or don't want to, don't insist: simply repeating a correct form doesn't show that the learner has acquired it.

Who corrects

Finally, decide who should be **responsible** for the correction. Each option has advantages and disadvantages, and there is no consensus on which is most effective.

Who	Advantage	Disadvantage
Self-correction	the learner makes the effort to repair the error independently	can be frustrating if the learner doesn't know the correct form
Peer correction	other learners think about the error and repair it	can be embarrassing and create conflict
Teacher correction	the repair is accurate	can lead to spoon-feeding and less learner involvement

ONLINE CLASSES

Peer correction can work well in breakout rooms, where learners may feel less exposed than in front of the whole class. You can also correct individuals privately, for example in a private chat message.

TEACHING TIP

There are good reasons to encourage self-correction before peer or teacher correction, but this isn't a rule. Learners can't correct something they don't know, and peer correction can create conflict in the group. Always consider the nature of the error and choose a suitable strategy.

For more on error correction in writing lessons, see the **Teaching Writing** handout.

In conclusion

Error correction can be beneficial as long as learners notice the correction and respond to it, and **focused** correction is believed to be more effective than **unfocused** correction. Correction is only one part of feedback: information about performance should also include plenty of **positive reinforcement**.

TEACHING TIP

Balance correction with positive reinforcement. Try not to end a lesson with lots of feedback on errors, as later lessons will give you chances to address them. Highlight good language and evaluate learners' performance in terms of communicative effectiveness.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Decide whether to correct based on the error's effect on meaning, its relevance to the lesson, how often it occurs, how many learners make it, and its emotional impact.
- There is no consensus on immediate versus delayed feedback. Accuracy work tends to favour immediate feedback and fluency work delayed feedback, but both have a place in each.
- Techniques can be explicit or implicit. Starting with implicit techniques and moving to explicit ones is a useful approach.
- Techniques can also be input-providing (the teacher gives the form) or output-prompting (the learner has to produce it).
- Correction can come from the learner, a peer or the teacher, and each option has advantages and disadvantages.
- Balance correction with positive reinforcement.

Further reading

Bartram, M. & Walton, R. (1991). *Correction: A Positive Approach to Language Mistakes*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications.

Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman. Chapter 17 (pp. 288–294).

Edge, J. (1989). *Mistakes and Correction*. Harlow: Longman.

Ellis, R. (2009). Corrective feedback and teacher development. *L2 Journal*, 1(1), 3–18.

Hadfield, J. & Hadfield, C. (2008). *Introduction to Teaching English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 4.3.

Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th ed.). Harlow: Pearson Longman. Chapter 8.

Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 8.4.6.

Nunan, D. (2015). *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

Pawlak, M. (2014). *Error Correction in the Foreign Language Classroom: Reconsidering the Issues*. Berlin: Springer.

Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning Teaching: The Essential Guide to English Language Teaching* (3rd ed.). London: Macmillan Education. Chapter 12.

Swan, M. & Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A Teacher's Guide to Interference and Other Problems* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tarone, E. & Swierzbin, B. (2009). *Exploring Learner Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ur, P. (2012). *A Course in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 7.

REFERENCES

Lyster, R. & Ranta, L. (1997). Corrective feedback and learner uptake: Negotiation of form in communicative classrooms. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 19(1), 37–66.