Correcting Without Frustrating

by Mauricio Pilleux

Error analysis has viewed the second language learner's errors as a genuine linguistic system in its own right and has rejected the traditional stigmatizing characterization they had had in the past. Terms such as "transitional competence" (Corder, 1967), "idiosyncratic dialect" (Corder, 1971), "approximative system" (Nemser, 1971) and "interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972) have been used to describe the second language learner's utterances in the foreign language.

Errors have been found to represent strategies of communication and assimilation which result from the attempt to communicate in the target language without having completely acquired the grammatical forms necessary to do so (Richards, 1975). Among these strategies, *over-generalization* caused by extension of the target language rules where they do not apply has been the most widely studied. Other strategies include *avoidance* (Kleinmann, 1977), *simplification* (Richards, 1975), and last, but not least, *teacher-induced* errors (Stenson, 1975), which result from "pedagogical" procedures contained in the text or employed by the teacher.

The teacher in the classroom, however, may ask himself how all these findings can help his students learn the foreign language better. The purpose of this article is to suggest some techniques for correcting errors.

The techniques suggested vary according to the language activity in play, communicative competence, oral drilling, pronunciation, composition, or listening comprehension.

Communicative Competence

In communicative competence activities the ultimate goal is to allow our students to "get meaning across" (Paulston and Bruder, 1976:59). In other words, the student is concentrating on communicating some idea and should not be interrupted to consider language forms or structures. At this level of communication, error correction is unnatural, stifling, and confusing to the student. Since we assume that errors should be viewed as a natural, unavoidable, and even necessary corollary of second-language learning, then error correction should be considered as feedback the student receives only *after* he has finished expressing what he has to say. Interrupting the student in order to correct an error disrupts the flow of his thoughts and frustrates his interest in communicating in the foreign language. Contrary to the perfectionist doctrine of the classical audio-lingual method, it is more important to offer the student the satisfaction of having communicated his ideas than to insist on his producing accurate allophones and invariably correct grammatical agreement.

The question then arises as to what to do when a student gets stuck or seems unable to continue in a communicative activity. One possibility is to allow him to resort to the native tongue and then go back to the foreign language. The teacher will then jot down the word or expression whose meaning he will convey after the student has finished his participation. Another possibility is to have the teacher help with vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation, but only when the student requests it. Useful phrases the students should be familiar with are "How do you say this in English?" "What's the word for a thing that . . .?" "Is that right?" Since communicative activities lend themselves to group participation, a third possibility is to use peer correction. Again, *this should be done after the student has finished talking.*

Oral Drilling

Two stages will be considered in the learning of a structural pattern: the mechanical drill stage, and the meaningful drill stage.

Techniques for correction vary with the class of drills and the nature of the mistake, but the most important point that the teacher must learn is not to correct every mistake the student makes. In mechanical drills, all mistakes on the new pattern and those of last week should be corrected. The students are working on internalizing new forms and obviously they must learn correct forms. The teacher simply supplies the correct form and the student repeats. (Paulston and Bruder, 1976:44).

Since errors at the mechanical drill stage are due to faulty learning of the pattern, the best model can only be provided by the teacher; it is totally inadvisable to have peer correction or self-correction at this level. An example. Suppose there is a transformation drill going on in which the cue is *He came here two years ago.* The student responds, "He has come here for two years". The teacher says, "come". The student repeats, "He has *come. . .*

At the meaningful drill stage the teacher may have the students self-monitor their mistakes whenever possible. Attention is called to the mistake and the students themselves are asked to do the correcting. Paulston and Bruder (1976:45) suggest three ways in which the teacher can indicate that there is a mistake:

For instance, in a drill on the present tenses, the student says: "He is working every day." The teacher can (1) repeat the incorrect word with an incredulous expression and question intonation, here *is working???* thus signaling "You can't really mean to say this;" or he can (2) repeat the word that triggers or co-occurs with the correct response, usually the cue, here *every day,* which signals the habitual present; or, finally the teacher can (3) simply mention the label for the grammatical category the student has wrong, here *habitual present.* Which of these is the best technique depends on the nature of the pattern and the mistake.

If the teacher wants to stimulate class response, he may avoid (at this meaningful drill stage) providing the correct response when the student hesitates or answers incorrectly. Instead, he may rephrase the question, cue, expand the incomplete but meaningful answer, or generate new sentences from the incomplete structure provided by the student (Holley and King, 1970).

Rephrasing the question

The teacher can help the student by reformulating his previous question or by breaking it up in several simpler questions that lead to the same answer. For example, the teacher asks: "Why didn't Peter come today?"
Student: . . . (hesitation)
Teacher: Is Peter here today? (Student answers)
Where is he? (Student answers)
Why is he not here? (Student answers)

Cueing

If the student does not give the correct answer in 10 seconds, then the teacher can hint at the answer by giving grammatical variations. Example:

Student: *He has . . .* (pause)
Teacher: *eat, ate, eaten*
Student: *He has eaten his food*
Student: *I have lived here . . .(1976)*
Teacher: *for, since*
Student (hopefully): *I have lived here since 1976.*

Expansion

Ungrammatical, but meaningful sentences, can be expanded into correct forms by the teacher. In some cases the student is not asked to repeat the correct form but simply listens to it. Example:

Teacher: *Did you swim in the pool last summer?*
Student: *Yes, I swim.*
Teacher: *Good. So you swam last summer.*

Generating new sentences

An incomplete answer given by a student can serve as a starting point for creating new sentences with the same structure.

Student: *He has . . .* (hesitation)
Teacher: *eat, ate, eaten*
Student: *He has eaten all his food*

Teacher: (one possibility, among others):
What have you eaten? (Student answers)
Have you eaten dinner? (Student answers),
etc.

Pronunciation Errors

Pronunciation errors at an early stage should be corrected immediately. The word "immediately" refers to cases wherein the class is engaged in a specific pronunciation drill exercise; this does not apply in conversational exchanges or in structure drilling exercises. The following procedures may be used to correct errors in pronunciation.

Plain imitation is the shortest and most economical procedure. The teacher models and the student imitates.

Comparing the troublesome sound to one in the native language may be useful to make the student hear the difference between two sounds which are not phonemic in his native language but which are in the foreign language.

Diagramming a simple sketch of the vocal organs and explaining how the sound should be produced is particularly useful with adult students.

Correcting Errors in Composition

In written work it is important that the students get feedback as soon as possible. Compositions may be divided into controlled compositions and free compositions (Paulston, 1972).

Controlled Composition

The possibilities of making errors in controlled compositions are minimal since these consist "of a written model of some type with directions for conversions or specific language manipulations in rewriting the model" (Paulston, 1972:39).

In controlled compositions where all the students use the same model for rewriting, the teacher may indicate the errors in any of several ways:

By correcting the exercises orally in class with each student checking his own, or somebody else's, exercise. Here the teacher has two possibilities: give the correct

forms himself or ask the students to provide them.

By correcting the compositions outside of class and underlining the errors, the teacher may provide the correct form or refer the student to a text or reference grammar where he can find out the correct form by himself.

Free Composition

In correcting free compositions the teacher may use the procedure described above for out-of-class correction. It is also useful to acquaint the students with a list of symbols for common errors. This

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list lessens the burden of correction for the teacher and tells the students what is wrong with their written work. A list might include, for instance, symbols such as:

w.o	word order
w.a	wrong auxiliary
sp.	spelling
prep.	preposition

In cases where this system cannot be used, the teacher writes the correct form next to the erroneous pattern.

Recopying

The important thing is to make sure the students really recopy the words, phrases or sentences. Otherwise, the time spent on correction will be a sheer waste of time. Paulston and Bruder (1976:230) suggest that if the teacher explains to the class that

he will not record the grade or credit for the composition until he has okayed the corrections, the students will soon chase the teacher with their corrections, rather than the other way around.

This procedure can be implemented by establishing a system in which there are no failing grades, except, of course, for the student who refuses to hand in the corrected versions of his compositions. This means that students will only be graded (with a passing grade) if all the errors that the teacher noted on the first draft have been corrected by the students on the second draft.

However, there may be cases where errors in syntax make the first draft incomprehensible. This is returned to the student for rewriting; then, the second version of the composition is considered as the first draft. By eliminating failing grades for those students who correct their compositions, and allowing the students to re-do the compositions in which they have failed, students are encouraged and their language learning experience is enhanced. Compositions treated in the way described here become a powerful learning device.

Listening Comprehension

Errors in listening comprehension can be found in the phonological code (e.g., distinguishing between *sheep* and *cheap, ice* and *eyes*) or in the grammatical code (e.g., *he's eaten* and *he's eating*).

Correction of comprehension exercises can be done by the students themselves, especially in language lab activities where they can check their own work from an answer key. To detect other errors in listening comprehension, but more importantly to encourage active listening, the teacher may form the habit of stopping at random and calling on students to piece together what has been said up to that point either by fellow students or the teacher. In this way no one student bears the entire burden of summarization; he need only make a contribution. Furthermore, this review not only serves as a check but as reinforcement for the entire class.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper has been to show some techniques that can aid the teacher in helping students overcome communicative errors, structure errors, pronunciation errors, written errors, and aural comprehension errors. However, the attitude of the teacher toward error correction can no doubt help make the difference between a rewarding, successful learning experience and a distasteful, frustrating one.

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