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Correction – is it worth it?

Welcome to ELT Forum!

Today we have Jeremy Harmer in the Chat Room to discuss the current topic: Correction - is it worth it?

<Georgina> Hello Jeremy, how are things?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Hi Georgina. Fine thanks. Here's hoping the technological force is with us!

<Susan> Hi Jeremy, I'm Susan - I teach at a school in Porto. This is my first time in a chat session so I hope I do ok!

<Jeremy_Harmer> Hello Susan. Welcome. You'll do just fine!

<Georgina> Hi Susan, don't worry, it's all quite straight forward. If you want to type in a message that is quite long...

<Georgina> divide it up by using three dots...

<Georgina> like I've been doing!

<Susan> Thanks - I'll get the hang of things I'm sure.

<Georgina> Hi Barney and Chaz, where are you from?

<chaz> Hi. I'm from Hackney, London.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Hello Chaz. Welcome to the Forum

<Susan> Hi

<Georgina> So, Jeremy, why don't you start by telling us what you've been up to.

<Jeremy_Harmer> I bet it's nicer in Porto than it is here - all rolling clouds and gales!

<Susan> You'd be surprised - we get quite a bit of rain, you know!

<Jeremy_Harmer> Georgina, I've been working on ELT Forum, writing articles, materials, planning a holiday...that kind of thing!

<Susan> Going anywhere nice?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Tuscany (well you have to try it once!)

<Georgina> Hi Pixie, welcome to the chat

<Susan> I went to Tuscany when I was younger. I quite liked it!

<Jeremy_Harmer> Hello Pixie. Where are you 'chatting' from?

<Jeremy_Harmer> That's encouraging Susan. I hope we'll like it to!

<pixie> Athens

<Susan> Well - Jeremy. Is it worth it? Correction - I mean!

<Jeremy_Harmer> Susan, I think there's a variety of opinions about that there are some who think that students need to be corrected every time they say something wrong, and others who think that since error-making is a natural part of language learning, students should be allowed to make mistakes without too much teacher intervention.

<Susan> I often think I over correct - but can't help myself...do you have any useful guidelines?

<Jeremy_Harmer> OK, Susan, I think correction is a very subtle matter (and by the way, most teachers I know have a kind of correction bug) the real question to ask is what the students will get out of your correction. For me, 'gentle' reformulation is often useful (where you don't actually go through the whole 'mistake-now repeat rigmarole) and where the student has a chance of correct him or herself in passing but everything depends on what the activity is and what the students are hoping to achieve.

<pixie> Yes, but in some cultures students want and expect teachers to correct as much as possible

<Jeremy_Harmer> You're absolutely right, Pixie, and that's a powerful reason for being (in principle) in favour of correcting! However, I'm impressed by Tony Lynch's comment that in fluency activities, for example because students are learning how to negotiate meaning and communication. The best time to correct is 'as late as possible!'

<Georgina> Hi Jelly!

<Jelly> Jeremy - what would you recommend as a good cut off point for correction. i.e. when do you say enough is enough?

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<Jeremy_Harmer> Hi Jelly, I think 'enough is enough' when either the students can't hear the correction any more because they've been over 'bludgeoned' or when the whole flow of a class is in danger of collapse.

<Georgina> Hi Fiona, if you have any questions for Jeremy, just type them in the box at the bottom and hit send.

<Georgina> Do you have much experience with teens? I often feel that they need to be seen to be corrected more - just in some ways to keep control of the class.

<Jeremy_Harmer> (BTW do any of you have words you miss on the keyboard every time? My own worst nightmare is students/students etc.

<Susan> I have problems with remember/rember! Good to see I'm not alone with not being able to type!

<Jeremy_Harmer> Well, where teens are concerned, it seems to me that much depends on them and you (the teacher) knowing what's what. So just as with other classes they need to be absolutely aware of when they can expect to be rigorously corrected and when the teacher may slacken off a bit.

<Jelly> It's a very fine balance between letting the students reach themselves and teacher's jumping in with the correct answer and possibly undermining their confidence - any hints to avoid that?

<Jeremy_Harmer> I think experienced teachers develop a feel for individual students, because correction, especially, is a very personal thing. One student I interview said 'teachers should be able to correct students without offending them' and that suggests that she had been humiliated more than once. We have to keep constantly sensitive to how our interventions are being received.

<Susan> Definitely, the more you know your students, I think the less of an issue correction seems to get but with new classes - Who knows!

<pixie> Yes, Jeremy, I agree-but if you are on short courses it is more difficult to get a feel of what is suitable for individual students.

<Georgina> You certainly have a point, Susan

<Jeremy_Harmer> In response to what's being said do you mind I get a bit anecdotal?

<Georgina> So long as it's good!

<Jeremy_Harmer> I had a music lesson the other day, and for some reason I just couldn't get anything right. My teacher interrupted me at almost every note (too sharp, too flat etc) and she was right, but the effect in the end was pretty devastating. I walked out with a great black cloud hanging over me and although I'm going back I'll do so a bit nervously because of that experience. No criticism of my teacher (she's great) but a reminder that correction can be pretty powerful stuff.

<Susan> so how would you have preferred her to correct you?

<Jeremy_Harmer> I think/hope in the way that we recommend to trainees...e.g. let there be some kind of 'flow', let the students 'get somewhere' some of the time so that the whole process doesn't become completely bogged down.

<Georgina> Jeremy, we've had a couple of questions from people who can't be here today...

<Jeremy_Harmer> Great, Georgina. Let's see them.

<Georgina> Catherine wanted to know how you felt about peer correction - students correcting each other?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Everything depends upon the group (and sorry to keep repeating myself) on the individual. In a supportive environment peer correction is really life-enhancing but if the 'corrected' student ends up feeling he or she is the only dunce in the room the effect can be very counter-productive.

<Jeremy_Harmer> It may be that we should ask students whether they want to be helped by their colleagues or not?

<Susan> But surely as teachers we need to give guidance? - and can't negotiate everything?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Indeed one of Mario Rinvolucri's article in this month's forum development pack suggest allowing students to indicate how/if they want to be corrected and I like that idea very much.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Susan, you're absolutely right that both because of our expertise and the

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students' expectations we should be giving a lead, but if we get students to give their views on how things should proceed we don't have to agree with everything we say, but we get them to 'buy in' to what happens in the class.

<pixie> ok Jeremy everything in life depends on the situation-but we do not always have the time during lessons to understand the individual, group etc.

<Susan> yes, what should we do then?

<Fiona> I think you really need to know your students well before you encourage them to correct each other. There are always the characters in class who want to make their fellow students look stupid.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Pixie, I have great sympathy for what you say, and in the pandemonium of a normal class. It's impossible to take time to consider everything carefully. That's why the American Wilga Rivers used to talk about the classroom as a place of 'blood and sawdust'!! However, I think experienced teachers who listen and observe develop a kind of 'second sight' about things like this.

<pixie> Yes, Fiona-but we need to sort this out at the outset and make students realise that this is not acceptable in the classroom.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Teachers have the problem of 'dominating students' all the time and we deal with it.

<Susan> But I think Jeremy had a point that we guide and get the students to come round to our ideas if we think they are for the best.

<Jeremy_Harmer> In the same way we need to gently steer the 'over-corrector' away from causing havoc. I am so impressed by 2ndary teachers who agree on codes of conduct with their classes at the beginning of a term or year. Correction is an element that could come into this.

<Georgina> Or the under-corrector - how do we deal with them? Any ideas?

<Georgina> Hi Jenny, welcome to the chat on Correction - is it worth it?

<Jeremy_Harmer> One of the things teachers need to do is (whilst encouraging fluency) is to get students to analyse their own language. That's where gentle hints, even during fluency activities may help

<pixie> Well, Jeremy I agree, correction in the manner you mentioned earlier is sure to leave one feeling a failure-based on my own experience of learning a foreign language, I think that perhaps correcting written work and oral should be handled differently - what do you think?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Yes, Pixie, I agree with you. Correction during oral work is often immediate and, as we have said, has to take into account the atmosphere, what's going on around you etc, whereas written correction can be done more judiciously I suppose with written correction my two golden rules are to work out whether you are 'responding' or correcting, and then to think of how you would feel if you received the kind of response or correction you were dishing out!

<Fiona> When it comes to written work, where possible, it is more effective to correct work in front of the students, especially young learners.

<Jeremy_Harmer> You mean, Fiona, with the teacher working with students as they write?

<pixie> However, do you not think that perhaps in oral work it is sometimes better to let students make mistakes so as to encourage communication.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Pixie, that's certainly the feeling of some commentators – and studies show that people do negotiate meaning when they have language difficulty. That's why we are so keen on recording errors and dealing with them *after* the activity.

<Susan> I disagree about oral correction being immediate. I like to make a note of the students' errors and then at the end of the week use them with an activity - or a game

<pixie> yes, Susan but how do you develop an awareness in students that they have made errors.

<Jeremy_Harmer> I really like Susan's idea of dealing with correction issues at the end of the week where you can get students to judge whether things are right or wrong, or give them errors and good language use and they have to decide which is which. Good fun and a real learning experience.

<Susan> Oh, I might make a point of it after the activity, but in general I think their confidence is built by not being interrupted. It wouldn't happen in real life, so why in the classroom?

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<Fiona> Yes, Jeremy in the case of less able writers, but the more confident writers can work independently and then sit with the teacher while the work is being corrected and discuss points as you go through.

<Jeremy_Harmer> OK, Susan, here's my difficulty. In general I think it is wrong to interrupt fluency activities but observation and personal experience also shows gentle intervention really working, with techniques like reformulation helping the communication along. It's a judgement call each time.

<pixie> Sure, Susan I agree-but the classroom is a learning environment.

<Susan> Yes, and I do correct - but generally in an unobtrusive manner – maybe by repeating their phrase in the correct way.

<Fiona> I know this is extremely time consuming and it is not always easy to find 10 minutes to sit with a student, but in my experience it is worthwhile in the end.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Well Fiona, as to correcting writing, it can happen as they write; we can get them to bring us their work; or we can give them stimulating comments for them to go away and re-draft.

<pixie> Yes, Fiona but 10 min is a break between lessons and a lot of ELT teachers are paid by the hour.

<Jeremy_Harmer> In process-writing we say that this re-drafting based on teacher response and suggestion is both a form of correction and a form of learning!

<Georgina> That's a very good point Pixie! But I think as teachers, we generally don't really think about that and will give up our breaks (willingly?)

<pixie> As for writing activities, I tend to give my students free writing with no correction and composition which is corrected-what do you think?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Pixie's 10 minutes are always under threat. Unless teacher guard their time jealously it just kind of drains away. All the more reason for having a clear correction policy!

<Susan> So what would that be?

<Jeremy_Harmer> I think it's absolutely right to give writing for different correction approaches sometimes we just want them to write and correction is not an issue. Sometimes we may say that for this piece of writing we're only going to look at e.g. punctuation or spelling, or the organisation of ideas. Not always the same thing, not always the sea of red ink!

<pixie> On another note I tend not to use a red pen, but black for correcting-students seem to appreciate this. Does anyone else do this?

<Susan> Definitely NO red pens please! I think it's so negative

<pixie> Jeremy, rather than a sea of red ink-codes can be used which are given to students at the outset.

<Fiona> I agree that there should be a consistent approach to correcting work throughout a school which can only be done with a policy. However, I am always concerned that it prevents me from using personal tried and tested methods that work well.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Yes, I like correction codes very much, first at the point of error, then, maybe later in the margin so the students have to find the mistake, and then just a cross in the margin, that kind of thing, and then the students 'putting right' of those errors is a creative thing, not just automatic

<Georgina> Sorry to interrupt this flow, we've got five minutes before we can open this up. Any more questions on correction?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Well, with codes, students and teachers agree together, but of course the teacher is 'more equal than others' in a sense.

<Georgina> I'd really like a definitive answer from you all - is it worth it? Yes or no?

<Susan> Yes - if done correctly?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Oh yes, correction is worth it, but only if it is done appropriately so that it is supportive, offers insights and doesn't interrupt other language learning/acquiring opportunities. Will that do?

<pixie> Statement-it is an area that will continue to baffle students and teachers-no solution.

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<Jeremy_Harmer> This bafflement is, of course, what makes teaching worth doing. Constant questioning, constant thinking about it keeps us all young!

<Fiona> Yes, if done sensitively

<Georgina> I guess we'll all continue to go around on this one.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Georgina, I think we will keep talking about correction, trying to get it right, getting it approximately right - we're only human.

<pixie> Yes. Jeremy - hope to see you in Athens - any plans?

<Jeremy_Harmer> I'd love to come back to Athens. No immediate plans. but I'm sure I'll be back there soon.

<Georgina> Jeremy, I have one last question from Liliana in Argentina - sent in through the site, not quite on the topic of correction, but related to your book How to teach English.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Let's hear from Liliana

<Georgina> Liliana: I've been using the book "How to teach English" for three years, the book is really useful to start the practices, I ask the trainees to categorize the activities they plan using the ESA elements that you present in the book. They usually have problems when they have to present new vocabulary or just do a guided practice. I also introduced them into the categorization provided by Jim Scrivener, which you include as a reference in your book (the ARC model). I wonder if it's ok to make them work with the two systems or if I'm making things still more complex for them?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Well Liliana's the one to judge how complex it is. I like Jim Scrivener's categorization but prefer mine (of course!). But the main thing is to get trainees thinking about what is going on. In the ESA model vocabulary presentation is often a form of study (S) but that depends on how it is done. Ditto pattern practice because any time that you get students to focus on the construction of something I call that 'study'. Students won't find it too complex if they realise that all we are doing is getting them to stand back from particular techniques to get a feeling of lesson (or part of lesson) 'shape'. (And an extra comment for Liliana...what we want is for trainees to get a feeling for lessons as events, dramas, songs, journeys, plays etc. That's why Jim, myself, lots of others think of different ways to describe those journeys.)

<Georgina> Thanks Jeremy, we'll pass this on to Liliana. Remember if you can't be here, the transcripts are available on the site for members. You can send in your questions through The Forum.

<Susan> Yes - definitely like the idea of getting the feel for the lessons

<Susan> Thanks Jeremy - this has been great - when is the next session?

<Jeremy_Harmer> Not exactly sure, Susan, but Georgina should know???

<Georgina> The next session will be on Wednesday 15th August at 13h00 BST for the new topic - speaking of which, you still have chance to vote for that on the site.

<Fiona> It's been great talking to you all!

<pixie> Bye, chat to you all next month - enjoy your summer-no classes-maybe for some of you.

<Georgina> Thanks Jeremy for your time today, it's been another great session and thanks for everyone for taking the time out to join us.

<Jeremy_Harmer> Thank you all for coming along, and thanks Georgina for your terrific moderation.

<Georgina> See you all next month!

<Jeremy_Harmer> Yep. Bye all.

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