

Correction – Part 1

To correct or not to correct?

Before you read **To correct or not to correct?** by Mandy Lavezzo & Helen Dunford, consider the following questions.

- In an article with this title what will you expect to read?

- What is your answer to the question of the title?

Now read **To correct or not to correct?** Did you predict the content correctly? Do the writers agree with you?

To Correct or Not To Correct?

By Mandy Lavezzo & Helen Dunford.

Error correction-how and when to do it-is a much -discussed subject.

After attending a teacher training course in the UK recently, Mandy Lavezzo, a teacher from Argentina, wrote her feelings about the lack of correction of her mistakes. Hers is one point of view. Another point of view is expressed by Helen Dunford, a teacher trainer at the Bell School, Cambridge.

The view of an overseas teacher

At Teacher training Colleges in Argentina, our teacher trainers are particularly concerned with correctness in English. We are encouraged to check our students' 'output' at all times. Consequently, students are likely to sacrifice their fluency for the sake of accuracy. They become optimal 'monitor-users' who think about rules consciously as they 'produce'.

However, we are well aware that the language we have learnt, and which we now teach, has been taught to us by teachers whose own English sounds bookish and stilted. All we want is to sound natural, less stiff, to lose all that bookishness and to acquire the colloquialism we lack. To achieve this, we need correction and a lot of it!

Nevertheless, when we attend an overseas-teachers' course in the U.K, we find that there is practically no correcting at all and this comes to us as a big disappointment. We obviously expect to be corrected by native speakers rather than be told that our English is good. I often wonder why we are not corrected? Why are trainers so reluctant? Is it because they are afraid of putting us off? Is it because they don't want to commit themselves fully to their task? Is it because they don't know where to start? I leave these questions open.

Mandy Lavezzo

The view of a UK teacher trainer

There is little doubt that the subject of error correction is important enough to warrant special attention on training courses for overseas teachers of English. However, in my view, the immediate and constant correction of all errors as and when they occur is not necessarily an effective way of helping course participants improve their English. Why is this?

Reasons for not correcting on the spot

- 1 Research (see for example Language Two by Dulay, Burt and Krashen) leads us to believe that while making errors is an important part of the learning process, systematic correcting does not improve written or spoken language. What does help is giving people more time to formulate what they want to say.
- 2 The danger of embarrassing the speaker in front of her/his peer group. Though not everybody reacts in the same way to having public attention drawn to their errors, there is always the risk of a participant losing face, to which the trainer must be sensitive.

- 3 Interrupting the flow of a fluency activity, thus negating the purpose of it, and spending so much time on correction that the initial aim of the lesson cannot be achieved.
- 4 The nature of the error is relevant. Not all errors are easy to correct, particularly fossilized ones, while minor errors are unlikely to interfere with communication.
- 5 The kind of session (i.e. methodology or language improvement) during which the error occurs also makes a difference. Devoting time to correcting during language lessons makes more sense than interrupting methodology input, where the emphasis is entirely different.

Constant correction doesn't help learners sound 'less stiff'. On the contrary, nothing could be more stilted than a conversation where both trainer and teacher are focusing on form rather than content, and spontaneity (or naturalness) is sacrificed for the sake of correctness.

The advantages of delayed action correction

Most trainers in my experience prefer to deal with spoken and written errors retrospectively—by making a note of them when they occur and returning to them at a later stage.

- 1 Both parties have thinking time, during which they can decide how best to deal with the error.
- 2 Feedback can take various forms, including individual. It can even be based on recordings of participants made during input sessions.

Conclusion

Trainers do regard it as important to involve participants in any decisions about the way in which correction is handled during a course. If overseas teachers feel that they haven't been given sufficient opportunity to voice their opinions on this matter, they are entitled to say so—preferably enough for a discussion to be organised and a correction strategy agreed.

Helen Dunford

Reference

Dulay, Burt, Krashen (1982) *Language Two*, OUP

