

Mistakes 1

by Mario Rinvolucri

The debate on when and how to correct mistakes is one that rouses deep feelings in language learners and teachers. Mario Rinvolucri, who works for Pilgrims as a teacher, trainer and writer, and is the author and co-author of many EFL books, believes they are sometimes best left uncorrected. In the first of two articles on the subject of correction, he explains why. In the next issue of MET, he will look at some modes of correction he feels are more psychologically acceptable to learners.

Most learners and teachers seem to agree that it is the teacher's job to correct mistakes made in the language classroom and that if she fails to do this, she is not behaving professionally. When you think about it, this is an odd consensus since correction is not a feature of natural, mother tongue learning, the most amazingly successful sort of language acquisition we know of. If an 18-month old says 'Mummy car', his father may well expand this to 'Mummy's going out in the car', but the aim here is not to correct the telegraphic utterance but rather to check the parent's own understanding of it. The aim is not didactic. Interestingly, some of the most thoughtful approaches to language learning we have seen over the last forty years have protected beginner learners from all forms of correction.

In Charles Curran's *Community Language Learning*, for example, beginner students have a free-flowing conversation in the target language. How? When a student wants to say something across the group, she tells the teacher what she wants to say in mother tongue and the teacher interprets this into her ear so that she can then say it out loud across the group in the target language. If the student wants to hear the utterance several times from the teacher, she can ask for this - but the teacher will not offer correction if the student imitates wrong. Curran's reason for discouraging correction is to lower the beginner learner's level of anxiety, to reduce the towering parenthood of the teacher and to allow the learner to build up their own self-confidence.

For many people, learning a foreign language can be very stressful. Earl Stevick in *Memory, Meaning and Method*, coins a useful phrase to describe the results of this anxiety on some learners: lathophobic aphasia. He defines this as unwillingness to speak another language for fear of making mistakes, and goes on to say:

'Common symptoms are avoidance of foreign language situations, addiction to continuous classroom training while resident in a country where the language is spoken, and the feeling that foreigners, some of whom want to practise his native language with him, would not also welcome his use of theirs.'

I wonder how much you may have suffered from lathophobic aphasia when first setting foot in a place, the language of which you had up till then studied only in a classroom?

Mistakes as sins

From talking in depth to language learners, it becomes clear that, for some people, making technical mistakes hits a level much deeper than that of mere second-language behaviour. These learners seem to feel that there is something immoral about making a language mistake and that such transgression is somehow akin to sin. In my investigation of exactly how people self-correct, I have come across people who flagellate themselves when they realise they are just going to or have just made a second-language mistake. I remember one woman who reported that when she heard herself making a mistake in Spanish, she would hear the correction either in a sweet inner voice which was easy to accept correction from or in a harsh, scary inner voice that she hated and that she could not bear to be with. That

second voice sounded very much like an old parental voice that castigated her about everything bad she did, not just slips in Spanish grammar.

I have a suspicion that it is often the students who are most insistent that they want more correction in class who perceive mistakes at a values and beliefs level, rather than as technical, behavioural phenomena. Do we do much good, as teachers, by responding to their moralistic masochism with congruent sadism? If a person cries 'beat me', should you?

The fact that technical mistakes can take on a moral hue is clear from teacher talk. I remember being chided as a boy for my 'howlers' in Latin. What did they mean by 'howler'? In German staff rooms you hear language-teaching colleagues talking about 'grave mistakes' that lose students more marks in exams than ordinary ones. If you ask them what a 'grave mistake' is, they say things like omission of present singular third person 's'. At a technical level this seems to me to be a minor slip and nothing more. Maybe omitting a third person 's' becomes a sin against the person of the teacher if she has spent hours stressing its importance. So what is actually a language technicality becomes a human relations affront, an attack on the love and authority of the teacher. There is no gainsaying that for some people language mistakes have a moral aspect to them, however illogical and counter-productive this may be.

OK, so what do I do about it?

I guess you may have ploughed through this far and are now wondering what all this philosophising has to do with the practical needs of your classroom. How does all the above affect your correction policy with, say, a lower intermediate group?

The major point is for you to allow yourself to question your role as an inevitable and permanent correction machine. Are there situations when it is far better to step out of the critic role and allow your students to speak and write without the constraint imposed by your linguistic observation of them.

Here are some situations in which I strenuously refuse to correct students, even if they ask for correction:

1: If I am involved in a letter exchange with members of the class, I let them know that I do not a) give their letters back b) pull out mistakes to comment on.

The aim of this free writing work is to help them spread their wings and take risks on the page. Any correction clips those wings. Any whiff of corrective intent turns me from an involved addressee into a critic. In writing their letters, they unconsciously borrow and re-use language from mine and when I quote stuff from theirs, of course, I quote it in a correct version. The intention, though, is not correctional; it just happens naturally.

2: In some classes I suggest that people write diaries and give them time to do this in class. I make it clear that no-one will see what they have written. It is entirely private. In making this contract, I renounce the chance to correct their work. Some teachers may think: 'if there is no correction, what is the point?' Here are some of the reasons for this procedure.

Talking to yourself, writing to yourself in the target language is an extremely intimate thing to do and gradually helps the language shift from 'foreign' to 'own'.

- Trying things out in the intimacy of inner monologue is a huge boost to learning. In this situation, the learner is completely free of external critics of her language and of her thought/emotion content. She is unjudged.

- Some students have a very strong intra-personal intelligence and need language exercises in which they can revel in their strength and learn language via it. This is one such exercise. (On multiple intelligences, see Howard Gardner, Frames of Mind.)
- If the teacher reads the diary entry, comments on it or corrects language mistakes, the core of the activity is blown. And I have met many excellent colleagues who feel in duty bound to read their students' diaries. It is a case of not knowing when one's absence is beneficial.

3: If students are working in pairs, threes or in the class plenary and discussing something that is emotionally or intellectually gripping, I

- a) do not interrupt with corrections,
- b) do not take note of mistakes to work on later,
- c) focus my mind in any way on the form of the language they are using. I am in the room as a another human being, not as a grammar, phonology, etc. filter.

Above we have looked at the zero option in correction. In my second article we will look at a wide variety of ways in which you can offer correction but in ways that make it hopefully more internally acceptable to more of the students.

References

- Gardner, H (1985) Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligence, Paladin (Granada)
Stevick, E (1976) Memory, Meaning and Method, Newbury House
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