CORRECTING ERRORS IN COMMUNICATION

Luíza Gomes dos SANTOS–Universidade Federal de Pernambuco

RESUMO

Este artigo visa a comentar as variadas formas de erros cometidos pelos alunos, os quais, numa dada atividade comunicativa, interferem na comunicabilidade da mensagem. Desta forma, este trabalho objetiva chamar a atenção do aluno para estes erros. Mas como fazer isto de forma sutil, positiva, construtiva, encorajadora? Numa tentativa de solucionar tais problemas, este estudo apresenta, inicialmente, algumas implicações envolvidas na atitude do professor ao corrigir seus alunos e finaliza propondo uma solução prática e efetiva, ao classificar os erros em três (3) categorias distintas: MEANING (significado), SOUND (pronúncia) e STRUCTURE (gramática).

The Problem

In any communicative activity, either in an undergraduate general English language class or in a graduate ESP (English for Specific Purposes) class, the aim is to encourage the learner to speak freely and to the limits of his competence on a subject which is meaningful to both speaker and audience. The audience – the teacher and/or other learners – are expected to listen and respond in the same meaningful way. However, it is precisely during this communicative phase that the learner makes the kind of mistakes most likely to interfere with communication in the real world that we are simulating in the classroom. It is
these errors that we want to draw to the student's attention.

But how is this to be done? It is rude to interrupt; not only is it rude, it can be demotivating and cause loss of face. The practice and manipulation phase of the lesson is concerned with the FORM of words; immediate correction is desirable in order to get the form right. The productive and communicative phase of the lesson is about MEANING; we are genuinely interested in what someone is saying, and if we start correcting the form, we are not only saying that the form is wrong, we are implying that the meaning of what they say is not sufficiently interesting or important to hold our attention.

**Error Collections**

Either you don't bother to correct the errors at all, or you find some system for noting them down for correction at a later stage. If you don't correct at all, you are denying the learner one of the main benefits of live teacher-student interaction, that is, constructive feedback on his or her performance. If you decide to keep a record of the errors, three systems suggest themselves immediately: tape record the whole exercise, try to remember the errors, or write them down in some form. Each system has its drawbacks:

- **Tape-recording** may discourage or inhibit the learner especially when he or she realizes why you're doing it. Retrieval of errors is a time-consuming business, involving going through the whole tape utterance by utterance.

- **Teacher memory** is fine if you can remember what may be a long list — I personally can't. Trying to memorise small details of form interferes with your ability to communicate fully on the meaning level.
- NOTING DOWN THE ERRORS seems the least awkward of the three; again, it may be distracting to the student, and you need to have a reliable and clear system, so that you don't waste time trying to decide what to write down.

**The Proposed Solution:** I would like to propose a practical version of the third system above, that is, recording the errors on paper in note form.

The techniques work like this:

1. Come prepared with a blank sheet of paper with three headings: MEANING, SOUND and STRUCTURE.

2. Jot down the important mistakes *as uttered by the student* under the appropriate heading. Transcribe exactly the words he or she uses.

3. At the end of the communicative phase, get the learner first to identify and then to correct the errors, in one of two principal ways:
   - EITHER read out the utterances in their original form and ask for oral identification and correction.
   - OR give the student the list of errors and ask him or her to correct orally or in writing. (To correct SOUND mistakes, ask the student to read out the utterance—often he or she will correct the error automatically).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEANING</th>
<th>SOUND</th>
<th>STRUCTURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The work was bad, but actually it is getting better.</td>
<td>component heavy/home huge</td>
<td>he say me not to do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I went in the auto</td>
<td>proportion</td>
<td>I have not the time where are completed the reactor vessels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr John told me... I want a cup of coffee...</td>
<td>chart/check</td>
<td>I try to explain me...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comments: Vocabulary errors are included under MEANING. It is often difficult to decide between the MEANING and STRUCTURE categories, e.g. "Mr________ (Christian name) ..." could be appropriate in certain circumstances, so I classified it here as inappropriate (under MEANING) rather than as incorrect (under STRUCTURE). Many MEANING errors are related to context — "I want a cup of coffee" is also fine in some situations, but not as a request; what we want the student to do with this category is not so much to "correct" an "error", but rather to become more sensitive to context, and to the choice of language items implied by context.

There are three reasons for writing down the utterance in its original form, rather than as some sort of linguistic description, e.g. "Pres. Perf. & When" or "Silent initial /h/". These reasons are:

- It is much quicker, as it takes less mental processing time. Some errors defy description in linguistic terms!

- It is much more precise; if you just put down "Initial consonant cluster", you will have trouble recalling the exact nature of the error.

- It enables you to give the error list directly to the student for self-correction.

It is worth keeping the STRUCTURE category even if you are more concerned with language functions; a functional exponent is one of a number of possible structural forms in a given context. If the error is grammatical, list it under STRUCTURE; if the error is one of contextual appropriateness, then list it under MEANING.

The choice of how to correct depends on the class. With a single private student, oral correction is quicker and better. With a mixed group, some of whom are inhibited by having their errors exposed in public, written correction is preferable. In this case,
you will need to make separate lists for each student — hard work, especially with a discussion involving frequent changes of speaker. (One solution is to bring in another "observer/recorder"). If the members of the group do not mind oral discussion of errors, then only one list is needed — and it is not even necessary to single out the student who made the error in the first place. Group correction is a useful exercise in itself, especially when dealing with questions of appropriateness which deserve discussion.

Finally, the error lists may be explored in a more formal follow-up lesson. If they are typed out, they can be used as a correction exercise for homework or in class. They can be collected together and collated to help plan remedial tuition — this is particularly useful for identifying and helping with persistent errors, such as those related to mother tongue interference. Some students treasure lists of their errors — as reminders of their weak areas on the one hand, and as a concrete sign of progress in their mastery of the language on the other!

NOTE

1 Although the teaching of ESP in Brazil focuses basically on the development of reading strategies (because our undergraduate students need at the moment to be able to understand the literature in English in their specific area of interest/studies) our graduate students also need some intensive training in speech production and comprehension so as to interact with visiting English-speaking lecturers.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


WOODESON, Elizabeth. Error Analysis, Theory and Practice Project B (paper by her, submitted in 23.4.81 to Prof. Roger Flavell her course teacher). University of Lancaster, 1981.