CORRECTING ERRORS IN COMMUNICATION

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RESUMO

Este artigo visa a comentar as variadas formas de erros cometidos pelos alunos, os quais, numa dada ati vidade comunicativa,interferem na comunicabilidade da mensagem. Desta forma, este trabalho objetiva chamar a atenção do aluno para estes erros.Mas como fazer is to de forma sutil, positiva, construtiva, encorajado ra, motivadora? Numa tentativa de solucionar tais pro blemas, este estudo apresenta, inicialmente, algumas implicações envolvidas na atitude do professor ao cor rigir seus alunos e finaliza propondo uma solução prá tica 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,[1] 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 inter
rupt; 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 genuine-
ly 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 Colections

   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 bene
fits 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 sys-
tems 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).

MEANING	SOUND	STRUCTURE
The work was bad, but actually it is getting better.	component heavy/home huge	he say me not to do it
		I have not the time
I went in the auto	proportion	where are completed the reactor vessels
Mr John told me... I want a cup of coffee...	chart/check	I try to explain me...

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   circum- stances, so I classified it here as inappropriate (un der 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 ut- terance 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 trou ble 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 function al 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 con- textual 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 pub- lic, 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 it-
self, especially when dealing with questions of appro
priateness 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   home
work or in class. They can be collected together   and
collated to help plan remedial tuition — this is   par
ticularly 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.

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