

RESOURCE

PRACTICAL CLASSROOM IDEAS FOR TEACHING LANGUAGES

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Correction

Mario Rinvolution

Is correction a necessary evil or, sometimes, we should avoid at all costs? Mario Rinvolution draws on his personal experience in a thought-provoking exploration of this controversial theme.

"Mario, you are absurd! You are my English teacher and you refuse to correct my mistakes!" This 17-year-old Austrian-Argentinian voice still rings in my ears, seven years later.

Andres, a very bright lad from a Vienna music school, was asserting his RIGHT to correction of the audio letters he sent me each day, as part of an audio cassette correspondence I had initiated with him.

So why did I obstinately refuse to do my DUTY and list his copious mistakes for him? My principled objection to this was that the cassette exchange was allowing him to stretch his English to the maximum, to try out new words, to experiment with new collocations and grammar constructions, to float new language on the relationship we had built up. (Proof of the warmth of the relationship is the rough way he took me to task!) I was extremely loathe to interfere with this creative process and focus his attention on relatively trivial language details.

After a one-month intensive course, Andres left Canterbury with a whole new crop of mistakes. He made as many mistakes as on day 1 of the course but they were much more advanced ones. He arrived with a lower-intermediate level of language and left with an upper-

intermediate one.

ZERO-OPTION in correction policy

The above story illustrates a decision not to correct a student for good technical and psychological reasons. In any class I teach, there are students whom I correct little or not at all.

How can you choose who NOT to correct? If you carefully observe how a student receives oral correction you get a strong sense of who laps up correction and who suffers it without benefiting. Students give you plenty of subtle feedback when your correction is unwanted and therefore hard for them to take on board.

There is theoretical back-up from Neuro-Linguistic Programming for applying a "variable" correction policy.



FLP-ers suggest that some human beings make decisions based largely on what other people think and others make their decisions based much more on their own inner criteria. (This distinction between "other-referenced" behaviour and "self-referenced" behaviour holds good in Western cultures, but when you think about Japan and some other East Asian societies you need a third concept: "group-referenced").

In a European context it is likely that a strongly self-referenced student will only happily accept and integrate correction when she herself asks for it, while an other-

referenced student is much more open to unsolicited correction. In correcting some students carefully and thoroughly and others sparsely or not at all, I am accepting psychological reality and refusing to waste my own and my students' time.

SIBLING CORRECTION

When students correct each other they are behaving like brothers and sisters in a family. Some people also call this peer correction.

There are plenty of exercises that prompt excellent sibling correction.

Here is one:

- Get a story which contains a problem for the students to solve. The story should be told in groups of 10-12 people.

- Organise your class into seated circles of 10-12 people - (you can do this even with fixed rows of desks).

- Give each circle one set of the slips of paper, in disorder. Ask them to a) find the order of the story and b) solve the problem.

No one may write.

No one may read anybody else's slip of paper.



(You will find a couple of ready-made problem stories in Section 9 of MORE GRAMMAR GAMES, Davis et al., CUP 1995.)

Your role in this exercise is to observe. Only give language help if you are asked for it. You will find that there is a lot of sibling correction, especially when a student reads something from her slip in an incomprehensible way. The other students are forced to ask her to read again and will often model better pronunciation for her. As the students read and re-read their sentences there is a huge amount of self-correction and sibling correction. This happens precisely because parental correction (yours) is not being offered.

PARENTAL CORRECTION

Teacher correction is inevitably parental but it can be punitive parent (in Eric Berne's *Transactional Analysis* terms) or nurturing parent. Let me offer you a nurturing parent exercise:

- Get your students to stand in a circle (this activity will not work easily if you have more than 40 students in your class).
- Cup your hands in front of you and imagine you are holding a word, a phrase or a sentence. Feel its weight and texture in your hands. Tell the students you are going to pass the word or sentence round the class. Each of them is to pass it one as if it were a physical object and simultaneously say it.
- Get the exercise going with a simple word. Then get them to work on a word that has a pronunciation problem for the group. If a student gets the sound wrong as he hands it to his neighbour, walk across the circle calmly and "take" the word back from the person who has just received it. Go back to the student before the student who made the mistake and give it to him and say it to him. This student again gives it to the student who got it wrong first time, and who now has a

second chance to get it right as he hands it on.

In this system of pronunciation correction, you correct INDIRECTLY, and you allow the person who made the mistake to listen to you modelling the word for him, and to a classmate modelling the word. At no stage do you need to look at the mistake maker or single him out (in any other way).

SIBLING AND PARENTAL CORRECTION TOGETHER

When your students are involved in free discussion or talk, listen in and note down both some of the brilliant things they say, and some of their mistaken utterances. Note each bit of language down on a different slip of paper. Write largely and clearly. You might end up with around 15 positive utterances and 15 negative ones.

Divide the board in two, one side for brilliant English and the other side for "yuk!" phrases.

Give your utterance slips out around the class and ask the students to put them up on the side of the board they feel is correct. Explain that some of the phrases are excellent and some are less so.

Have the students gather round the board so they can see what you are doing. Have a close look at the slips and change them round if the students have misplaced them. Talk to yourself out loud as you do this, providing a commentary of what you are doing. Don't look at the students, be in your own world.

When all the wrong sentences are in the right half of the board, correct them, still speaking reflectively and quietly to yourself.

This exercise, which I learnt from John Barnett, has three useful aspects:

- a) the students are asked to focus on their own rightness as well as their wrongness, on their successes as well as on their failures. This focus is realistic and

makes accepting useful correction somewhat easier.

- b) they have a chance to test out their own language criteria without initial teacher interference. They often also comment on another student's criteria (sibling correction).
- c) finally the students receive reassuring parental correction but without the parent focusing accusingly on any individual student. The teacher/parent is in dialogue with self, and so, for many students, less threatening.

RESOURCE would love to hear from you if you disagree with the above ideas, or if you can add creatively to them. The editor would be delighted to publish some of YOUR techniques for correcting students and your thoughts on what correction is all about.



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last book is *LETTERS*, written with Burbidge, Gray and Levy, OUP, 1996, and his next book will be *STUDENTS EXPLORE THEIR OWN PROCESS*, with Davis and Garside, Cambridge, 1998.

In summer 1997 Mario will be teaching person-centred language courses at Pilgrims in Canterbury, U.K. These will aim firmly and equally at promoting self-development and rapid, deep English Language improvement. To find out more, fax Mario on 0044-1227-76211 or phone on 0044-1227-459027. These courses could be just right for you, if you find that RESOURCE caters to your needs.