

## Mistakes 1

by *Mario Rinvolucri*

In MET Vol 7 No 3 Mario Rinvolucri explained why he feels that some mistakes should be left uncorrected. In the second of his two articles on correction, he describes some techniques that make correcting more user-friendly.

In the last issue of MET, I argued that the consensus among learners and teachers that the latter should automatically correct language mistakes is highly questionable. I looked at some of the negative effects of heavy teacher correction and suggested that a zero correction option may sometimes make sense. I outlined three cases in which I have learnt to forget about correction.

In this article I want to look at three modes of correction that make it more psychologically acceptable to learners. These are:

- mixing criticism with appreciation
- peer correction (students correct each other)
- 'parental' correction (and how to make it more efficient).

Which techniques you feel you can use will depend on the age of the students you teach, their culture/s and the atmosphere created in the group by your way of being and your style of teaching. Here's the first one.

Mixing criticism with appreciation

In some ways, to focus a student only on what he has got wrong is pretty perverse. In a given oral intervention or piece of writing, there are plenty of things he has got right and sometimes there are things he has got surprisingly right. It seems only fair to dwell on these features as well as on the mistakes. Psychologically speaking, you establish good rapport with the student by offering praise where it is due, and this good feeling should be enough to allow the student to cope with your criticism without losing his self-esteem, and without defensively switching off. What follows are correction techniques that allow for such balanced evaluation.

### 1 Brilliant English versus Could-be-better English

Come to class with 30 or 40 postcard-sized cards and some blu-tak. While the students are engaged in paired, small-group or whole-class oral work, listen in and write down any excellently used word, collocation or longer utterance on a card. Use one card per chunk. Also note down mistaken utterances. Write in large clear letters.

Do not indicate on the card whether it is a compliment or a complaint card.

Once the oral work is over, divide the board with a vertical line down the middle and put up the heading brilliant english one side and could-be-better english the other side. Give out the cards at random to the students and ask them to blu-tak them to the appropriate half of the board. Do not give them any help in doing this.

Now gather the students round the board and, with your back to them, look reflectively at the cards. Start commenting on those cards that have been placed on the wrong half of the board and move them across, e.g.



'hugely delightful ... I wonder who put it in the could-be-better column ... sounds fine to me, very English' (moving the card across)'some people in this class don't know how good they are ...'

Once all the cards that are on the wrong side have been commented on, go through the remaining mistaken utterances correcting them to yourself with the students still looking over your shoulder.

What I have come to love about this technique of John Barnett's (Cambridge Academy of English) is its calm, meditative, introverted non-aggressivity which makes it so much easier for the students to stomach correction.

## 2 Kind angel and harsh angel

Group the students in sixes. In each six ask two students, A and B, to sit facing each other. A and B are to have a conversation or interview each other. A has two students sitting either side of her and a bit behind her. The left-hand angel is to note down all her mistakes as she speaks to B and the right hand angel notes down all the things she gets beautifully right. Likewise, B has a harsh angel and a kind one flanking her.

harsh angel	n	...n	kind angel
kind angel	n	...n	harsh angel

Once A and B have finished their conversation, their angels feed back their good and bad news.

This exercise materialised when some Indonesian teachers on a training course taught me about how Muslims each have a defence and a prosecution guardian angel. This seemed a beautiful frame for balanced correction.

## Peer correction

If the atmosphere in the learning group allows and facilitates it, there is little that is more powerful than students helping one another to be linguistically accurate. However, if your class, as can happen, is riven with bad feelings and tensions, then peer correction is a no-no. It is also unlikely to work if the students are in a hierarchical relationship to one another, as can happen in an in-company course.

Here, then, are two sibling correction ideas.

### 1 Waging war on persistent mistakes

Explain that you want each student to take a partner who will be their mistakes mentor for the next 5 class meetings. Ask the pair to agree on which mistakes each will listen out for in the other's speech. It is good to restrict the list to very common and repeated mistakes. Each student should have a maximum of half a dozen things on their list.

Whenever the correction buddie hears their partner make one of the agreed-on mistakes, they discreetly correct. On the whole, it is easier for students to accept a poke from their mistakes buddie than to accept public correction from the teacher. If the group feeling is right, this mutual correction really helps relationships between the students.

### 2 Peer correction dictation

Dictate the first sentence and then ask each student to pass their paper to the person on their right. Each student checks the spelling of the sentence they have just received and corrects it if necessary. You dictate the second sentence. Each student passes the two sentences to the person on their right. Each student now checks and corrects the two



sentences in front of them, and so on. At the end of the dictation you show them a master copy so they can check out their spelling hypotheses.

(Note: the Shadow Dictation on page 14 of Dictation, Davis & Rinvoluceri, CUP, is another excellent brother-sister correction activity)

#### **'Parental' correction**

However much we may wish to be different, our correction as teachers nearly always has a parental feel to it. The teacher may present herself to the students as a technician, as a sister or even as a daughter, but they nearly always sense her to be a parent, especially when she is in critic mode. This makes teacher correction a very psychologically complex matter.

Most people notice that when they correct students, some will appear appreciative and take the correction on board while others seem to brush it off and mentally trash it.

A rational response to this observation is to adopt a differential correction policy. There is little point in correcting those who are 'correction-deaf', and the time saved allows correction-freaks to get more of it.

The idea of treating students 'unequally' may at first shock you. Yet if you were a doctor, would you feel guilty for not having prescribed antibiotics to each and every one of the patients you saw in this morning's surgery? It is palpably a waste of time to correct a student when they do not want it.

Differential correction has theoretical backing from Neuro-Linguistic Programming, which has identified that some people depend a lot in their decision-making on the ideas and opinions of others, while a second group of people are very 'self-referenced': they draw on their inner criteria and feelings in making decisions. As language learners, the first group, the 'other referenced' folk, gratefully accept teacher-initiated correction. To the second group, such teacher-initiated correction can sometimes feel anything from irrelevant to really annoying. They much prefer to measure their language performance against their inner feeling for the language, their 'Sprachgefuehl'.

A major, simple option you have in deciding on the right correction policy is to ask the students. Say they are going to do 20 minutes writing in class, ask each person to decide whether they want you to read over their shoulder and help them with corrections or whether they want your help only when they call you. Ask the first group to draw a teacher on a page they lay on their desk, while the second group draw a teacher crossed out:

When I have used this exercise with adult learners, around half have wanted me to initiate correction. The others simply called me from time to time with questions like:

'How would you say X ...?'

When I first tried this democratisation of correction, I knew I had hit on something important: the students clearly felt the choice I had offered was apposite and natural. The technique at once had a classical feel to it. Why did it take 30 years to appear? Maybe I'm a slow learner.

#### **Your ideas and experiences**

I know that correction has been a topic that has drawn a strong response in MET and that Thérèse Tobin is always on the lookout for exciting new ideas to present to MET readers. Why not offer other teachers correction techniques you have learnt or devised? If you do, the magazine becomes a meeting place, a forum, rather than a one-way channel.

Ill Mario Rinvoluceri