

Evaluation, error correction in accuracy and fluency activities

People learn a foreign language not because they want to speak without mistakes, but because they want to communicate with someone else. Unfortunately the common experience says that students and teachers, too, believe that making a mistake is a sign of failure. Students are usually afraid of speaking as they are afraid of the teacher jumping on all his/her mistakes, they are afraid of other students laughing at them. They do not like being taught writing as they suffer from the red pencil syndrome. This point of view should no longer be valid.

Mistakes were made, are made and will always be made. In fact they belong to learning. They are an integral part of the process of education and they play an important role. In a good atmosphere they are teacher's and learner's friends showing both the right way and telling them where to go next.

We should distinguish between the mistakes and errors, anyway.

Mistakes

Following are some definitions:

A mistake appears "...when the learner has learnt something and sometimes gets it right but sometimes uses a wrong form." (Norrish, John: *Language learners and their errors*, Macmillan.)

What does the J.Edge say in *Mistakes and Correction* (Longman)? "The most important sort of mistake is a mistake that leads to a misunderstanding."

The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics tells us the following: "...a mistake is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspect of performance."

Errors

What can be found in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*? "A thing done wrongly, a mistake." It is a very brief explanation. Anyway, can we agree?

J.Edge in *Mistakes and Correction* (Longman) says: "... if the student cannot self-correct a mistake in his or her own English, but the teacher thinks that the class is familiar with the correct form."

The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics gives the following definition:" The use of a linguistic item (eg. A word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc.) in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning. ... Errors are sometimes classified according to vocabulary (lexical error), pronunciation (phonological error), grammar (syntactic error), misunderstanding of a speaker's intention or meaning (interpretive error), production of the wrong communicative effect, eg. Through the faulty use of a speech act or one of the rules of speaking (pragmatic error)."

The conclusion may be that the error results from incomplete knowledge, while a mistake happens thanks to lack of attention. A mistake is a slip of the tongue. A learner can probably correct his or her mistakes. An error, on the other hand, occurs because the learner does not know the correct form and so cannot produce it at this stage of learning. Errors can show the evidence of learning. So cannot the mistakes. Errors are generally systematic while mistakes are generally non-systematic and learners are normally able to identify and correct them.

Anyway teachers and methodologists, too, sometimes do not distinguish between these two expressions and talk only about the mistakes. Learners making mistakes should be viewed as

positive. Mistakes are a sign that the learners are learning something. They are steps to the success and should be viewed this way.

Causes of errors and mistakes

1 Poor teaching: the thing has not been explained and trained well. The teacher has not used methods suitable to different intelligences in the class. S/he might not have given the students chance to practice the thing etc.

2 The range of materials: Wide range of materials does not always solve the problem. They must be aimed at the item taught, train all four skills. They must be suitable for the age and level of students.

3 Interference from the mother tongue: The influence of the native language can be heard or seen in pronunciation, grammar and even in vocabulary (eg. false friends).

4 Errors from the learning process: English language has many rules and, of course, many exceptions. Over-generalisation of the rules or neglecting exceptions may cause serious misunderstandings.

5 Carelessness: Either the teacher or the student are not well focused on the problem neglecting its importance.

6 Responding to the demands of complex communication: The user of the language tends to simplify or omit parts of the sentences believing it might sound more natural.

Responding to learners' errors and mistakes

Before we start talking about the teacher's reaction we should mention what accuracy and fluency is. Accuracy describes the learner's use of grammar, vocabulary and phonology. Fluency describes the learner's ability to convey, to produce or to understand a message as it is intended.

Should all mistakes in fluency and accuracy be corrected? Of course not! J.Edge in *Mistakes and Correction* (Longman) says: "...the importance of mistakes is that they should often be ignored." The teachers must be sensible, empathetic and experienced enough to know when correction is needed and when not at all. Generally we correct most mistakes when we are focused on accuracy. On the other hand, when fluency is highlighted, we leave the mistakes uncorrected. Just after the presentation the most important mistakes can be mentioned.

The teachers can respond to learners' errors and mistakes in a number of ways:

1 They can stop the student and

- a) Invite him to correct himself.
- b) Encourage other students to supply a correction
- c) Supply a correction themselves.

2 They can make a note of the error or mistake and talk about it later either individually or with the whole class.

3 They can choose not to respond.

It is up to the teacher, which out of the techniques mentioned above s/he chooses. S/he will certainly flavour the technique with fingers, gestures, facial expressions, chalk, pencils ... Showing incorrectness is a difficult task and should be used with tact and consideration. It is important not to rush into correction before we know what someone wants to say. We should think about politeness as well as correctness. Most students hate being corrected in front of the whole class and we have to find the ways avoiding the public sometimes. Correction should not be a kind of criticism or punishment. When we evaluate, we not only find mistakes but we also point out positives. Students should not feel embarrassed any time they make a mistake. Encouragement is sometimes more important than correction. A well-known saying that can be found in several languages says: We learn through our errors.