

Unit 11 The role of error

■ What is the role of error?

This unit focuses on mistakes learners make when they speak or write English. Mistakes are often divided into **errors** and **slips**. **Errors** happen when learners try to say something that is beyond their current level of language processing. Usually, learners cannot correct errors themselves because they don't understand what is wrong. Errors play a necessary and important part in language learning, as we will see below. **Slips** are the result of tiredness, worry or other temporary emotions or circumstances. These kinds of mistakes can be corrected by learners once they realise they have made them.

■ Key concepts

There are two main reasons why learners make errors. Can you think what they are?

There are two main reasons why second language learners make errors. The first reason is influence from the learner's first language (**L1**) on the second language. This is called **interference** or transfer. Learners may use sound patterns, lexis or grammatical structures from their own language in English.

The second reason why learners make errors is because they are unconsciously working out and organising language, but this process is not yet complete. This kind of error is called a **developmental error**. Learners of whatever mother tongue make these kinds of errors, which are often similar to those made by a young first language speaker as part of their normal language development. For example, very young first language speakers of English often make mistakes with verb forms, saying things such as 'I goed' instead of 'I went'. Errors such as this one, in which learners wrongly apply a rule for one item of the language to another item, are known as **overgeneralisation**. Once children develop, these errors disappear, and as a second language learner's language ability increases, these kinds of errors also disappear.

Errors are part of learners' **interlanguage**, i.e. the learners' own version of the second language which they speak as they learn. Learners unconsciously process, i.e. analyse and reorganise their interlanguage, so it is not fixed. It develops and progresses as they learn more. Experts think that interlanguage is an essential and unavoidable stage in language learning. In other words, interlanguage and errors are necessary to language learning.

When children learn their mother tongue they seem to speak their own form of it for a while, to make progress on some language items, then to go backwards, and to make mistakes for a time before these mistakes finally disappear, usually without obvious correction.

Errors are a natural part of learning. They usually show that learners are learning and that their internal mental processes are working on and experimenting with language. We go through stages of learning new language, and each new piece of language we learn helps us learn other pieces of language that we already know more fully – like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which only make full sense when they are all in place.

Developmental errors and errors of interference can disappear by themselves, without correction, as the learner learns more language. In fact, correction may only help learners if they are ready for it, i.e. they are at the right stage in their individual learning process. But experts believe that learners can be helped to develop their interlanguage. There are three main ways of doing this. Firstly, learners need exposure to lots of interesting language at the right level; secondly they need to use language with other people; and thirdly they need to focus their attention on the forms of language. (See Unit 10 for more about these three ways.)

Sometimes errors do not disappear, but get 'fossilised'. Fossilised errors are errors which a learner does not stop making and which last for a long time, even for ever, in his/her foreign language use. They often happen when learners, particularly adults, are able to communicate as much as they need to in the foreign language and so have no communicative reason to improve their language. These fossilised errors may be the result of lack of exposure to the **L2** (second language) and/or of a learner's lack of motivation to improve their level of accuracy.

Key concepts and the language teaching classroom

- We need to think hard about whether, when and how to correct learners.
- We mustn't expect instant learning. Learning is gradual, and errors will occur.
- We need to think about what kind of mistake the learner is making – a slip or an error.
- If the mistake is a slip, the learner can probably correct him/herself, maybe with a little prompting from the teacher or another learner.
- Sometimes, particularly in fluency activities, it is better not to pay attention to learners' errors (i.e. **ignore** them) so that the learners have an opportunity to develop their confidence and their fluency, and to experiment with language.
- Some errors may be more important to correct than others. Those which prevent communication are more important than those which do not, e.g. missing the final *s* off the third person singular of a present simple tense verb doesn't prevent communication. But using the present simple tense instead of the past simple tense can sometimes prevent communication.
- We need to think about what is best for the learning of each learner. Different learners within the same class may need to be corrected or not, depending on their stage of learning, learning style and level of confidence. Different learners may also need to be corrected in different ways.
- Ways of helping learners get beyond their errors are:
 - to expose them to lots of language that is just beyond their level through reading or listening
 - to give them opportunities to focus on the form of language
 - to provide them with time in class to use language to communicate and interact and see if they can do so successfully.
- A good time to correct learners or to provide them with new language is when they realise they have made a mistake or need some new language. We should encourage learners to ask us for this help.
- Errors are useful not only to the learner but also to the teacher. They can help the teacher see how well learners have learnt something and what kind of help they may need.

See Unit 28 for categories of mistakes, Unit 31 for how to correct learners and Unit 32 for how to give feedback.