

LANG matters

Following the tradition of devoting issues to a specific theme, the Editorial Team has decided to dedicate this one to **accuracy, fluency and error correction** and seeks to offer a wealth of ideas and activities that are useful for our readers.

It is a theme which has been dealt with over and over again, but tackling 'accuracy' and 'fluency' without neglecting errors in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, register and so on is not an easy task!

Here are some ideas to help learners deal with a slip of the tongue, a casual mistake, conceptual mismatch, wrong collocation, literal interpretation of idioms (*Ehi, amico, questo bar è il mio pane e il mio burro*), and wrong cultural interpretation.

According to **Paolo Balboni's** excellent *Ma che bell'errore*, it's only human to make mistakes and he suggests that teachers should **try to understand why the student is making a particular kind of mistake** and what can be done with the mistake. Moreover, it is quite difficult to understand a lesson if students are from different cultures and backgrounds! *Are you agree?* Let's try with the **'think aloud protocol!'**

Sulle tracce dell'errore, **Anna Biguzzi** talks about **the effect that the 'mass media' has on language** and how mispronounced words can create difficulties in communication.

On the other hand, an important consideration is that in real life communication speech is not always very accurate and **Anila Scott-Monkhouse points out three very good reasons why in some cases correction can be detrimental** in her *I made a mistake and you didn't correct me!* **Cecilia Perillo** feels that it's all about **building confidence and providing meaningful opportunities** without neglecting preferred learning styles. Furthermore, aspects such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety in Krashen's 'Affective Filter Hypothesis' play an important role in Second Language Acquisition and **Maxine Jones** illustrates how *Breaking down barriers and building up trust* can lead to a **higher degree of accuracy**. The communicative competent and creative (CCC) student in **Joanna Carter's** contribution can be achieved by **bringing writing back into the classroom** through the introduction and application of process writing. Is that *Just Right or Just Write?*

Well, as **Cristina Bareggi** suggests, *nobody is perfect* and **teachers could use 'errors' to detect students' level of knowledge** as errors have an important role to play in the language acquisition process.

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“I made a mistake and you didn't correct me!”

Learner Training and Free Speaking Exercises

by Anila Scott - Monkhouse

Languages are used to communicate. This is often forgotten in foreign language courses, especially by the learners themselves. They concentrate very hard on grammar, choice of lexis, word order, and in free practice exercises conversation is slow, hesitant, and often boring. What can be done to help students become more confident speakers? Students can improve their speaking skills only by speaking, so only by doing communicative activities can they learn to communicate. There are many types of free practice exercises: role plays, games, debates, simulations, drama, problem solving, telling stories/anecdotes, describing pictures/feelings/experiences, practising for oral exams, etc, but also asking the teacher questions before/during/after class. Free practice exercises are usually considered the production stage of the lesson. However, this is only partly true, because any conversation involves both production and reception, i.e. it is a two-way process because it consists of both speaking and listening, in other words interacting with another person, within tight time limits, because long pauses are not allowed: what is needed is the ability to process strings of sentences and ideas in real time.

Students usually enjoy this stage of the lesson, but often feel they are wasting time because if they are speaking to another student, mistakes will go undetected and they are not improving because they are not being corrected. It is therefore important that students understand that linguistic competence is not the only objective of free speaking activities and why correction is not so important at this stage. This does not mean that it is totally absent, because the teacher will be monitoring pairs/groups and making a note of the most common mistakes. Yet students do not realise the purpose of the exercise and often get frustrated. It is essential that students know what they are doing and why – this develops learner autonomy and discipline is easier too. After all, it is true to say that if we know where we are going we get there faster. Students often realise they have made a mistake and object by saying “I made a mistake and you didn't correct me!” or “Is it right to say it like that?”. It is therefore extremely useful to be very explicit about the purpose of the activities and briefly point out to the students why correction can actually be detrimental in this case.

There are mainly three reasons:

- a psychological reason;
- a linguistic reason;
- a didactic reason.

◆ **The psychological reason is tied to the student.** Language is part of a person's identity as it reflects who we are, and it is difficult to express this in another language. When people are speaking in a foreign language, they are afraid of making blunders, they are concentrating hard on what they want/have to say, they are often embarrassed, and may feel foolish. If they are continually interrupted and corrected, their inhibitions become stronger and they will soon get frustrated, and end up feeling like a child who is being scolded all the time. However, **lessons are the place where students can dare to risk communication because it is a non-threatening environment and the advantage of this sheltered environment for communication is lost if the learners are constantly corrected.** Students can develop language abilities through understanding and delivering messages rather than constant correction and focus on form, they learn to listen to the other speaker, ask for clarification, reformulate, adjust to each other in order to provide comprehensible input. Obviously the teacher must balance accuracy and fluency work both within and across lessons, but students must understand that in using language (both L1 and L2) **it is vital to learn how to express something even when they are not too sure how to say it:** it is often necessary to make do with whatever resources they can master. In free practice students learn to improvise, it is a real-life task, and it activates both brain hemispheres (the left, i.e. the analytical and logical side, and the right, i.e. the creative side). The more the students speak the more confidence grows, and when students become less dependent on the teacher they become actively involved in their learning. **Free speaking exercises give the students a better reason for using the language other than the vague “to learn the language” and therefore aid acquisition, not just learning.**

◆ **The linguistic reason is tied to the student too.** We all know how irritating it can be to be interrupted and perhaps corrected when we are speaking or trying to make a point. If this happens

when we are speaking in a foreign language, not only does it irritate us, it also makes us lose concentration, we end up by forgetting what we were talking about or where we were trying to get to. Obviously this happens to the students too. An important consideration is that in real life communication speech is not always very accurate (grammatically speaking), we rarely have time to plan what we are going to say next and use fully accurate grammar and vocabulary, therefore it is useless to insist on a fake focus in the classroom. On the other hand, students are often aware of their own mistakes and slowly develop their own self-correction techniques or learn how to formulate the sentence differently – which is a technique native speakers use too. **Basically what is essential in conversation is the message, in other words what the speaker has to say, more than using the appropriate tense or knowing the exact word for something.** This is where another aspect comes into play: giving the learners the freedom to use their own means, therefore developing paraphrasing strategies, skills which are typically used in L1. This in turn helps the learners become gradually less dependent on thinking in their native language and mentally translating into L2, which makes conversation so slow and boring for the listener and so frustratingly difficult for the speaker. Mistakes are an essential part of any learning process and should not always be considered negatively. **Students must be free to make mistakes: speaking is a creative activity and even the language learner must use L2 creatively.**



◆ **The didactic reason is mainly tied to the teaching/learning process.** In the freer speaking part of the lesson **what the teacher and the students should be concentrating on is fluency rather than accuracy.** Accuracy comes into the presentation part of the lesson and is the objective of drills, controlled practice, etc. In free speaking activities attention is focused on meaning, it is therefore a more natural use of the language, and language becomes a means to an end. The teacher often ignores mistakes while the activity is in progress for different reasons:

- because the focus of the activity is for the learners to get fluency practice and the absence of correction practises real life situations,
- because the mistakes are above the students' current level,

- because a particular learner is shy or weak,
- because students can often correct their own slips.

Unfortunately in the students' minds (but also in the minds of their parents, employers, etc.) the idea of learning a foreign language is still influenced by the traditional approach used, for example, for teaching Latin or Greek or reading classics. They believe that the main focus of language learning is accuracy, i.e. they must learn how to manipulate accurately grammar and lexis of the foreign language. This leads to perfect knowledge of the rules and excellent execution of drills and mechanical exercises (e.g. change from positive to negative, singular to plural, present to past, etc.), but very rarely produces a good speaker (e.g. who could order a coffee in Latin?). Controlled practice is no doubt essential, especially at the lower levels, but there must also be space for real communication. In other words, **correction should be limited to serious mistakes which actually lead to a breakdown in communication, because the message is incomprehensible. Realising that they can convey a message even with limited means is very satisfactory for the students and this increases motivation and determination.**

In conclusion, it is important that teachers explain to their students the purpose of the exercises they are doing and that they help their learners realise that:

- they should have lower expectations on themselves when speaking in a foreign language, because far too often it is the students in the first place who are very harsh on themselves;
- they should try to be 'little children' again, in other words, have the courage to make mistakes because what is essential is content, not form, and this is the reason why when we are listening to foreigners speaking in our L1, we appreciate the effort they are making more than listen for their mistakes.

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MEANINGFUL OPPORTUNITIES

by Cecilia Perillo

Different learners need different things, and one of these is the amount of work in the classroom devoted to *accuracy* and *fluency*.

Most teachers are familiar with the structurally competent but communicatively incompetent learner, but it's not always easy to say the right thing at the right time!

Some students may not *feel* confident with *freer* speaking activities (like open-ended questions that elicit more than a one-word answer) and may need lots of roleplays and discussions to help them become more *fluent*, on the other hand, a group of students might be able to 'carry on' about most topics, but at the same time they may be making *mistakes*, so they need to concentrate on being more *accurate*.

A big element here is the level of the learners and their preferred *learning styles*. Lower levels need not only language, but also lots more *fluency* work as they are more hesitant when they speak and need to build confidence, while a more advanced group would need more *accuracy* work, to iron out remaining *mistakes*.

We all learn in *different ways* and this may be another reason why students 'can' or 'can't' do activities in the classroom. Each one of us learns differently because we prefer to learn through some senses, rather than others. Some learners rely heavily on what they can see, others prefer to hear and others need to do the activity. As teachers it is important to teach in a multi-sensory direction. Moreover, by knowing 'how' they learn, students become more *confident* and able to find ways to improve their English and *reflect* on their needs. It is helpful for teachers to refer to the 'Multiple Intelligence' theory when introducing new concepts and adapt teaching methods to the different learning styles. It is helpful for teachers to have a knowledge of how learners receive and store information. Teachers should help students understand that they can learn through *mistake making*.

Here is an example of a MI lesson plan which may seem demanding of teachers in terms of organisation for the event. Resources must be collected, liaising with other school staff must be done, classes must be scheduled and activities conducted, and so on, but 'don't worry, be happy': the following plan has been

made easier to develop with the useful help of ready made materials.

Teachers need to be prepared to challenge questions such as: 'Is this what the Special Event is all about?', 'Is this work going to help my students become more *accurate* and consequently more *fluent*?'

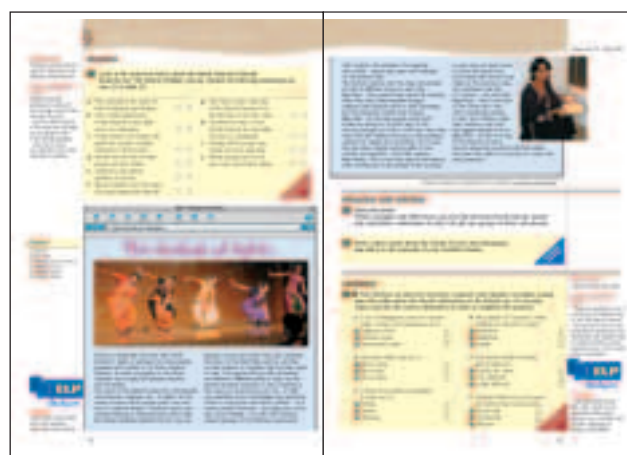
Special Events

Communicating your own ideas *fluently*!

Special Events, like birthdays, celebrations and festivities, may be a starting point for devising a range of meaningful activities and opportunities which aim at improving *accuracy* and *fluency*.

The aim here is for students to successfully communicate the main points using their English.

- **Linguistic Intelligence:** read stories, poems or other materials on the special event / prepare speeches / write descriptions / interview people / invite a guest speaker. **Read Made Materials:** *The festival of lights: Plain Sailing 2* pages 92, 93 – Class discussion: **which analogies and differences can you find between Diwali and the Natale and Capodanno celebrations in Italy?** – Write a short report about the results of your discussion – Listen to an interview between a reporter and an Indian man who talks about the Diwali celebrations.



- **Logical – Mathematical Intelligence:** create statistics, graphs / numbers of people involved / number of days involved / [Dates and the Hindu Calendar](#).
- **Spatial Intelligence:** draw scenes / draw a map of India.
- **Musical Intelligence:** listen to music of the period and the event / sing songs / create your own / make instruments.
- **Bodily Kinesthetic Intelligence:** learn the dances of the day.
- **Interpersonal Intelligence:** role-play / group work / [prepare a poster which illustrate the different things done on different days](#).
- **Intrapersonal Intelligence:** individual work / complete an evaluation sheet / [Portfolio Self-Assessment Checklist](#) (page 94 – *Plain Sailing 2*).

The above lesson plan covers the following European Language Portfolio checkpoints:

- Reading: I can skim short texts and find relevant facts and information.
- Listening: I can generally follow the main points of an extended discussion around me, provided the spoken language is clearly articulated.
- Spoken Interaction: I can start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversations on topics that are familiar or of personal interest.

In the lesson plan learners are *exploring different ways* to celebrate special events, thereby allowing many more students to be valued for their strengths and it allows *more time* to be devoted to the exploitation of a particular topic. It allows an idea or concept to be developed in depth. It promotes cooperative learning as students have to work together to design and execute the program.

It provides an opportunity for student work to be given to audiences beyond the immediate classroom thereby making the accomplishments more meaningful. Finally it provides the opportunity for students to communicate their ideas on a topic through different products and provides a sound bases for attaining learning outcomes.

Another approach and a very effective technique is for teachers to use “**dictogloss**”. After an introduction to the subject and some pre-teaching of essential lexis, learners are read a text twice (*The festival of lights*), the first time they listen to get the gist of the text, the second time they have to note down the key words and in groups work together to produce a version of the text. The emphasis may be on communicating the main points in English. The teacher and groups then correct their texts and compare them with the original.

This is all about building confidence and providing ‘**meaningful opportunities**’ and a supportive environment and getting students to feel that their contribution is precious and it makes a difference with or without mistakes.

Just to finish off, you might find the following questions useful when deciding to let an error go or not!

1. Does the mistake affect communication?
2. Are we concentrating on accuracy at the moment?
3. Is it really wrong?
4. Why did the students make the mistake?
5. Is it the first time the student has spoken?
6. Could the student react badly to my correction?
7. Have they met this language point in the current lesson?
8. Is it something that the students have already met?
9. Is this a mistake that several students are making?
10. Would the mistake irritate someone?

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Breaking down barriers and building up trust



“Easy does it” in the error correction phase of language teaching

by Maxine Jones

When I consider the vast area relating to error correction and accuracy, the words “fear” and “trust” come immediately to mind. These spring from my own experience as a native English speaker teaching EFL in Italy for the last ten years. When introduced to classes as a native speaker who couldn’t speak Italian, I was often faced with 25 or more expressions which ranged from terror and fear to unease or discomfort, depending on the level and age of the students I was about to teach.

As the courses progressed, I hoped students would come to understand two crucial facts:

- I was not going to judge them, disparage the language they produced, or look at them with the blank stare some London taxi drivers have notoriously been known to adopt on hearing “Leicester Square” mispronounced;
- secondly, regardless of their level of proficiency, or the errors they made, we **could** communicate.

Slowly, by focusing on the successful **communication** which occurred in class, students began to develop trust – both in the teacher as a facilitator, whose role was to help them negotiate meaning – and in their own ability to communicate a message. The fact that the teacher was a native speaker may have fortified the “boundaries” which can rise between teacher/interlocutor and language student and I asked myself how it was possible to chip away at these boundaries and build up trust in the classroom, especially when dealing with the essential, but often tricky, area of error correction.

Making communication the basis of error correction

Stephen Krashen, whose work on second language acquisition theory and development has greatly influenced all areas of second language research and teaching since the 1980s, maintains that

“Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in

the target language – natural communication – in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.”

He put forward five main hypotheses, including the **Affective Filter Hypothesis**, according to which ‘affective variables’, such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety play an important role in second language acquisition. According to Krashen, students with a low level of anxiety are more likely to be successful language learners. Factors such as intense anxiety, together with low self esteem and low motivation, can “raise” the affective filter, causing a mental block which prevents students from being able to use the input they receive to acquire new language. **If we wish to facilitate language learning, it is important to create an environment which lowers students’ “filters”.**

While we obviously cannot control all the factors which affect the anxiety levels of students, we can, however, examine the way in which our methodology contributes to lowering or raising this barrier. Moreover, by ensuring that error correction is addressed in relation to the development of greater understanding and clearer production of “meaningful interaction”, we can shift the focus from the student’s “faults” to the achievement of a communicative goal.

What error correction practices could have an effect on students’ “affective filter”?

Correcting one student in front of the entire class, for example just after they have spoken, can sometimes lead to performance anxiety and fear of failure on the part of students, thus leading to a lower rather than higher degree of accuracy. Research has shown that **for error correction to be effective, it should be carried out shortly after students have completed a communicative task** – if possible it is best to examine errors in the same lesson. It is common, due to time restraints, large classes etc, for teachers to deal with the correction of errors some time after students have handed in

their written work or carried out an oral communication activity, by which time students may often have forgotten not simply what they said or wrote, but more importantly, **why they did so**. When they do examine their errors, they often can no longer remember why they produced the error or in what context it occurred.

Before focusing on the errors students have made, we can first focus on whether they have successfully communicated the message they were required to express in a given exercise. If students have successfully managed to fulfil a task, or convey their “message”, it is essential to take the time to **highlight** and **praise** this. Sometimes we can be so focused on wanting to teach students to speak accurately, that we may forget we want to give them the tools to **communicate effectively**. When students are given explicit verbal or written feedback which underlines their success in communicating an idea or performing a particular function, the corrections which follow can represent the possibility to further increase their communicative ability in the L2, rather than giving them the sense that, until such time as everything is perfect, communication will not take place – a feeling that would discourage and frustrate even the most determined of pupils.

In order to avoid this situation, while still addressing the problem of accuracy we can:

- give students **sufficient time** to prepare themselves for an oral or written activity, so they have time to access their store of knowledge and provide them with clear indications of the vocabulary and structures that **may** be useful, while underlining the possibility to use **all** their knowledge to communicate. The more appropriate preparation time they have, the greater the possibility their output will be less conditioned by stress – thus there should be fewer errors to correct!
- take note of errors while students are speaking, and when the activity ends, point these out to students. Ask them if they can try and figure out the correct answer **themselves**. This can be done individually, in pairs or in groups. Group work is particularly effective, as input regarding possible corrections is multiplied. Try to put strong and weak students together, and encourage students to share their knowledge and explain to others in a cooperative manner.
- at the end of a learning unit, use activities such as “Dictogloss” (see “Grammar Dictation”, R.Wajnyrb OUP) to provide students with the possibility to identify gaps or common errors in their own personal inter-language (e.g. he are going) in the framework of a group activity. Correction is immediate and contextualised, as

the language used is in a meaningful text and students are not “put on the spot”.

- focus on the **process** which leads to language production, not solely on the result. Students often make mistakes in a very systematic manner, as they may have internalised a rule wrongly. If, for example, a student has not understood that the present progressive form is constructed with the verb “to be” **and the** present participle, they may continue to produce “He walking”, convinced it is correct. Simply giving the correct answer does not address the **process** which leads the student to continually make the same mistake and may result in confusion and frustration. While revision periods are essential for “catching” those who have fallen through the “explanation net” and lack the analytical skills to independently auto-correct themselves on repeatedly seeing and hearing the correct structure, group work, where students re-examine the “why” and “how” of structures and patterns, can also provide these students with the possibility to understand the **correct path** to the right answer.

In addition, the use of the target language as the language of the classroom can constitute a useful tool in the journey towards increasingly correct and comprehensible output and comprehension. When the L2 is frequently used in the classroom, students have more opportunities to improve their accuracy, as they are exposed to more meaningful exchanges in which the teacher provides a correct model. The teacher’s input, adjusted so as to constitute “comprehensible input” for students, provides an invaluable model for students, allowing them to seek and confirm patterns and internalize vocabulary and “chunks” of language. Maintaining an open and relatively stress free classroom is a great challenge; it requires us to put ourselves in our students’ shoes, and remember that what comes naturally or easily for us (communicating in the L2) calls for great concentration and effort on their part. However there is no doubt that the satisfaction they express at having reached a new goal makes it all worth it.



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Just Right or Just Write?

by Joanna Carter

*In this article we will look at problems with and ideas to help promote accuracy and fluency as applied to the **writing skill** and consider the teacher's and students' role in error correction.*

In today's English language classrooms, especially where the communicative approach is prevalent, the terms **accuracy** and **fluency** are more often than not, associated with the spoken language. Both elements are seen as fundamental in equal measures to developing good speakers of English, but may have a different emphasis at different times in the course of teaching and learning. For example, in a standard PPP (presentation, practice and production) styled lesson, new language, be it grammar, functions or vocabulary is often presented by the teacher orally. The students then practice the language in a controlled environment where the aim is to develop accuracy through oral drilling, repetition, concentration on form and pronunciation. Finally the students are given the opportunity to experiment, personalise, expand on and 'play' with the new language in freer conversational or speaking activities to develop fluency.

It mustn't be forgotten, however, that the terms accuracy and fluency can be just as strongly associated with the development of that other and equally important form of communication: **writing**. The two terms may convey similar but also slightly different ideas when applied to this skill as apposed to the speaking skill:

- **accuracy in writing** could mean that communication does not break down due to mistakes in grammar, vocabulary and spelling (in speaking this includes pronunciation rather than spelling);
- **fluency in writing** could mean being able to convey a message successfully through a flow of ideas that are organised, coherent, respect certain cultural patterns and sound naturally English.

Furthermore, in writing, to be fluent a message must be clear the first time as there is not the luxury of repetition, paraphrasing, and backtracking which are features of speech. In general terms we could say that **accuracy and fluency are both essential elements in being able to successfully communicate a message be it when speaking or writing.**

Unfortunately, it is probably fair to say that writing is

often given different treatment to the other skills and that **in many English language classrooms less time is devoted to writing than to speaking, listening and reading.** Speaking is usually given priority as the communicative skill. Writing is often seen as simply a support to and means of consolidating what has been practiced orally and not as a means of communication in itself. It is also seen as a somewhat time consuming activity to be done in the precious few hours students spend with the teacher. It is therefore often relegated to a homework activity to be done outside the classroom. This activity often consists of writing compositions as they are requirements of formal examinations.

The sad result is that many students find writing difficult and hateful as it becomes a solitary, totally unsupported, non communicative and often boring task. They have **very little motivation and idea on how to write and what to write about.**

These difficulties are compounded by another important factor. Because we have more time to write something, errors are less tolerated than in speech. Furthermore because they are fixed on the page for all to see it is **very tempting** for the teacher to correct every single one of them. Unfortunately this attitude does little to actually help the student as White and

Arntd point out, focusing only on language errors 'improves neither grammatical accuracy nor writing fluency'. So even if a student has managed to put some ideas down on paper, they are often faced with the completely demoralising situation of being handed back a homework composition covered from head to foot in bright red ink! They feel complete failures because the teacher effectively completely ignored their ideas, only pointed out what was wrong and gave no indication on how to put it right.

It is hardly surprising then that **many students leave school either**

feeling very insecure about their writing skills or not caring about them at all. This is a great pity as in today's world email is arguably becoming the main means of communication and **an ability to compose an**



effective written message is indispensable.

So what can be done to redress the balance and reinstate writing to its proper place in the system of language teaching as a whole and produce students who are competent in the writing skill?

One possibility is the introduction and application of **process writing**.

Process writing brings writing back to the classroom not as a time consuming, solitary activity but a **interactive, collaborative and creative one**. In this approach students are supported in generating ideas and are encouraged to concentrate on content. Process writing activities also help students to focus on who they are writing for, why they are writing and what the reader wants to know. All these aspects promote communication and fluency. Furthermore, in process writing students are given the opportunity to draft and redraft what they write and this is given just as much or more importance than the final piece of work itself. They realise that they can add, delete, restructure and reorganise their writing and are thereby helped to correct their own work. Finally, the teachers' role is a different one in process writing activities. **They give feedback to the student between drafts, not on the end product and are required to respond to content more than to form**. Therefore they shift from being a 'marker' to a 'reader' of written work (Graham Stanley, British Council Barcelona). These aspects of process writing are much more effective in developing competent and accurate writers.

Let us consider now then some practical ideas for applying this approach to writing in the classroom. Process writing happens in different stages. The number of stages can vary but here for the sake of clarity and simplicity, I will consider three.

Stage 1: Pre-writing

The aim of this stage is to stimulate the students' creativity, generate ideas and get students to think about how to approach a topic. At this point the students don't actually have to produce much written work but collaborate through speaking. Specific activities for this stage could be:

- **Brainstorming** – the students are divided into groups and in a time limit produce as many words and ideas about a topic as they can. When the time is up, students regroup and again within a time limit see if they can add to their original ideas.
- **Cubing** – this is a discovery task where the students have to quickly think/write about a topic in six different ways. E.g. they describe it, compare it, associate it, analyse it, apply it, argue for and against it. (Idea by Graham Stanley, British Council, Barcelona.)

Stage 2: Focusing ideas

In this stage, students write concentrating on meaning and content rather than accuracy and organisation of their work. The most important aspect is the message and who it is for. Activities for this stage could be:

- **Fast writing** – this is exactly as it sounds. Using the ideas previously generated students just write as fast as possible within a time limit. If they can't think of a word in L2 they write it in L1 or leave a gap.

The aim is just to keep writing (the text can be revised later).

- **Paper email** – each student has a piece of paper and must write an 'email' to the person on their right in a one minute time limit. They should be encouraged to ask a question. When time is up, they pass the email to the right and receive one from the left. They must now read and respond to this new email. This activity really promotes the idea of audience and text type. (Idea by Emma Pathare, British Council, Dubai.)

Stage 3: Evaluating, structuring and editing

In this final stage, students focus on form and organisation of texts. This is the stage where they can redraft and edit and are encouraged to correct their own mistakes.

- **Peer editing and proofreading** – the first step to being able to correct your own mistakes is being able to correct a peers. Here, texts are interchanged and evaluation is done by other students. As well as spelling, they can be asked to reduce texts, edit them and identify the most important information.
- **Grammar auctions** – the teacher chooses ten to fifteen sentences from the drafting stage of student compositions. Half are correct and the other half contain mistakes in grammar, syntax or vocabulary. The sentences are written on the board. In groups, students then try to buy sentences in an auction with 'pretend' money (e.g. that used in the game Monopoly). If they buy a correct sentence they make a profit, if they choose one with a mistake they make a loss.

Throughout all the process writing stages, the teacher's role is to guide and facilitate and suggest.

Feedback on written drafts should be balanced between comments on content and correction of mistakes.

Perhaps rather than simply underlining mistakes, appropriate language can be highlighted, preferably in another colour other than red!

By bringing writing back into the classroom in this way, instead of the PPP styled lesson mentioned at the beginning of this article perhaps we can develop a CCC styled student. That is communicative, competent and creative.

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Well, nobody is per~~x~~fect

by Cristina Bareggi

Everyone has a stock of amusing anecdotes about English learners' errors. But what is an error? In this article we try to identify and categorize errors, with particular attention to lexis.

This is a true story. A girl of 16 is attending one of those English summer courses in England. She is asked to describe a picture: 'it's a supermarket, and there is a woman pushing a ... well ... er...' (what's the name of that thing?) oh, yes: **a chariot!**

The teacher goes on laughing for a good five minutes. That girl was me. It happened ages ago, but I still remember that error. I think because of the teacher's reaction. He was a very professional, polite man, yet he just could not help laughing. Errors are often funny, but why? Perhaps, we should start by asking what an error is.

When referring to a language, we could say that an error is anything that deviates from the norm coded by mother-tongue speakers of that language. Yet, the very concept of "norm" is debatable. What could be considered correct in a context (e.g. talking with friends) is not so in another context (e.g. in a formal letter or an essay). Moreover, the perception of correctness can vary even among native speakers. Also the appropriateness of language in relation to a given social code should be taken into consideration while stating whether an utterance or a piece of writing is correct. Thus, we have to accept that the concept of error is - to a certain extent - relative. A more "flexible" definition of error then could be: anything that in a given context at a particular time is accepted as correct by most native speakers. In other words, if a native speaker of English does not raise his/her eyebrow or laughs, this means that your English is more or less correct!

The relativity of errors does not mean that teachers should not care about them, though. Errors are very important, not so much because they are a means of evaluating students, but mainly because they say a lot about the language acquisition process. Hence the necessity of identifying and categorizing them.

Error analysis is a well-established discipline, and literature on error typology is easily available. Here, we will briefly mention the possibility of categorizing errors in two ways:

- by linguistic type,
- by reasons for their occurrence.

In the first case, errors can be classified as productive or receptive, depending on whether the student is writing/speaking or reading/listening. They can also be classified as errors in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, register and so on.

In the second case, categorizing is slightly more complex, since you have to take into consideration the learner's interlanguage, i.e. the level of language knowledge reached.

- **An error can occur because the learner does not know a particular structure or rule yet, and make a random guess (pre-systematic error).** The learner cannot usually explain or correct this type of error.
- **An error can be the result of testing hypotheses about a partially-acquired language system (systematic error).** For instance, an Italian child (my 5-year-old son) saying **beverò* instead of *berrò* does not know that the verb *bere* is irregular, but produces something on the basis of what he already knows - a regular verb pattern. Learners cannot correct systematic errors by themselves, yet they can explain why they have made them (my son in fact told me: "Ma se si dice *bevo*, allora si dice anche *beverò*, mamma!").
- **An error can occur even when a learner knows a language system perfectly.** It can be a slip of the tongue, a casual mistake, maybe caused by fatigue or nervousness or a lapse of concentration (**post-systematic error**). In this case, learners do know they have made a mistake, and they are able to correct it (often with an "on-the-spot" correction, using reformulations such as "No," "Sorry..." etc.).

To make things more difficult, if the language is an L2, we also have to consider language interference, that is the influence of L1 - or other L2s - on the language in case.

After these general remarks on error typology, we can now concentrate on **lexical errors**. Of course, we can apply the general categories to lexical errors too. So lexical errors can be productive or receptive, pre- or post-systematic, language interference errors and errors of avoidance. But within what can be generally called lexical - or vocabulary - errors we can identify

other different categories. **There is not only misspelling, but also conceptual mismatch, wrong collocation, literal interpretation of idioms and wrong cultural interpretation or false friends.**

There is no need to give examples of misspelling or false friends. We will instead focus a little more on the other categories.

Activities for classroom use

IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY
●●

1. Use the dictionary to complete the following idiomatic expressions of comparison. Which pairs have an exact Italian equivalent?

old	mad	pleased	high	smooth	plain
	thick	happy	quick		

1. as _____ as Pinch
2. as _____ as the hills
3. as _____ as a flash
4. as _____ as a kite
5. as _____ as a mill pond
6. as _____ as two (short) planks
7. as _____ as thieves
8. as _____ as Larry
9. as _____ as day/as the nose on your face
10. as _____ as a battery as a March hare

Conceptual mismatch implies choosing the wrong words for a concept, an idea. For instance, using the word *chariot* to label the idea “vehicle with four small wheels you put your shopping in” is a conceptual mismatch. In this particular case, the learner (me) correctly identifies a semantic field “vehicles”, looks for a word to match the concept, and, among the words she knows at the moment (systematic error), chooses a wrong one. Overgeneralization (e.g. saying *vehicle* instead of *trolley*) can be considered a particular type of conceptual mismatch.

Wrong collocation means incorrect matching of words within a lexical “chunk”. The following are instances of collocational errors made by some Italian university students of English:

- **do a task* instead of *perform a task*,
- **requests grow up* instead of *requests increase/grow*,
- **small criminality* instead of *petty crime*.

L1 interference can play an important role in collocational errors, as in the case of **small criminality*, which is clearly a loan translation of the Italian set phrase *piccola criminalità*. In the cases of **do a task* and **requests grow up*, instead, there is no L1 interference. The wrong collocation **requests grow up* is also a conceptual mismatch: within the semantic field “become bigger, greater” *to grow up* goes with the concept “people”, whereas *to grow* and *to increase* go with the concept “quantities”.

What would you understand if someone told you: *“Ehi, amico, questo bar è il mio pane e il mio burro!”*. Nothing, for sure. Yet, I really came across this nonsensical Italian sentence watching an American film with Italian dubbing. It is a clear case of literal interpretation of idioms. The English idiom is *to be somebody’s bread and butter*, and it means: to be

somebody’s main source of income. A good Italian translator should have recognized the English idiom as such, and should have translated it with a corresponding Italian idiom. *“Ehi, amico, io mi ci guadagno da vivere / il pane con questo bar!”* would have been much better.

The last category we want to focus on is **wrong cultural interpretation**. Last year a primary school teacher of English told her class that the Pilgrim Fathers were friars (sic!). In effect, *Father* can be a title for a priest (not a friar, though, for whom you would use *Brother*). But here is a case of cultural deficiency reflected on lexis. A similar case is the translation - by a young applicant for a job as a lexicographer - from Spanish *maillot amarillo* into Italian **body giallo*. *Maillot* can mean *body*, *tutina (da danza)* but *maillot amarillo* is a set phrase in sport, and its correct Italian translation is *maglia gialla*. Of course, the applicant did not get the job.

To sum up, we have seen that there are many types of lexical errors, and that these types can coexist or overlap. It is important for a teacher to develop an awareness of their importance. **Recognizing lexical errors then allows the development of adequate consolidation and remedial strategies.** Teachers could, for example, look for activities on vocabulary that focus on a particularly problematic aspect, or make up activities themselves (a good starting point could be the online vocabulary resources downloadable from LANG website).

I have so far deliberately chosen not to deal with the issue of correction. I am not a teacher, and this is not my area of competence. In my opinion, however, **correction should not be immediately applied by the teacher unless errors impair communication.** Had I, more than twenty years ago, said **a woman walk pushing a shopping trolley*, my teacher probably would not have laughed, because that grammatical error would not have impeded communication in that context. Saying *chariot* instead of *trolley* did, so that lexical error was worth correcting, even if with a laugh.

To conclude, errors should not be bugbears for teachers, but one of the means to detect students’ level of knowledge, and to improve it, perhaps with a laugh. However, always remember to laugh about mistakes, not at the people who make them.

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