

ACCURACY AND CORRECTING MISTAKES

A. How important is it to be accurate?

What do you think?

Would you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. It's not important for students to spell English words correctly, as long as their meaning is clear
2. It's not important for students to use correct grammar, as long as they are getting their message across

Reasons for maintaining correct usage even when incorrectness does not affect meaning:

Smooth and 'comfortable' input/intake

Courtesy

Respect / self-respect

Teacher professionalism

B. What is 'correct' usage

Error or legitimate variant? Which would you correct?

1. She ain't here.
2. He come.
3. We spent a fortnight away.
4. The people which ...
5. Frontal teaching
6. I am waiting here for hours.
7. They preponed the meeting
8. It was a red line.

Some of these items (1, 3, 7) are based on usages within specific native varieties of English.

Others (5, 8) are based on local non-native usages in English.

The rest (2, 4, 6) are based on common learner usages.

Many linguists today claim that such forms should be seen as legitimate 'variants' among ELF speakers, rather than 'incorrect'.(Jenkins, 2006, Tan, 2005).

'Correct' has become a politically incorrect term!

But how far are insights or hypotheses of researchers into language directly applicable to teaching? (see Widdowson, 2000.)

‘Any kind of teaching is based on a kind of prescription, and it would be simply disingenuous, and also rather silly, to deny this’ (Seidlhofer, 2006: 45)

Why should we relate to such usages as incorrect or unacceptable?

1. Learners have a right to be taught the most useful, acceptable and important forms used for ELF worldwide.
2. I don’t have time to teach everything: need to decide on priorities.
3. Learners want unambiguous guidance.
4. We need a clearly defined basis for classroom teaching, materials design and tests.

So...

When we encounter variant ways of saying things in English, I will encourage awareness of and respect for the different varieties of English, with their diverse usages.

But I will not relate to usages such as those listed earlier as ‘acceptable’ or ‘correct’ for the students’ own emergent language production; and I will correct them if they appear.

But how do we know which items are acceptable / correct?

Most of these are obvious.

For others we have to guess, based on our own intuitions.

Grammars? Dictionaries? (mostly based on native varieties)

In the future: a reference work on internationally accepted forms as a ‘wiki’?

Conclusion (1)

There is such a thing as correct and incorrect / acceptable and unacceptable usage in the context of the teaching of English as a lingua franca.

Where learners use incorrect or unacceptable forms, we should probably correct them.

C. Does error correction help?

Truscott (1999, 1996, 2007) claims that correction in both oral and written work does not work:

- teachers correct inconsistently, sometimes wrongly
- students are sometimes hurt by being corrected
- students may not take corrections seriously
- correction may interfere with fluency
- learners do not learn from the correction

But ...

- teacher intuitions
- learners themselves claim it does help (Harmer, 2005)
- there is some empirical evidence in support of the hypothesis that learners do learn from being corrected (Doughty and Varela, 1998)

Conclusion (2)

The effectiveness of corrective feedback is variable; it may only work partially and gradually. But on balance, providing corrective feedback is more likely to help than withholding it!

D. What kinds of corrective feedback are more/less effective?

Which type of correction, on the whole, leads to better 'uptake'? (Lyster and Ranta, 1997; Lyster, 1998)

- Simple 'recast' is most often used, but leads to least 'uptake'!
- Recasts may not be perceived as correction at all!
- The best results are gained from corrective feedback + some negotiation.

Within communicative interaction, we try to make our corrections unobtrusive because we don't want to disturb the 'flow' – so we use quick 'recasts', and don't demand self-correction

But many of these may not be perceived as corrections, or even noticed, so may be a waste of time!

If we correct, we need to make sure 'uptake' has occurred, even if this slows things down a bit.

Conclusion (3)

For optimum effectiveness, corrective feedback should

- a) be explicit
- b) involve some measure of active negotiation

It may or may not be effective to correct during (oral) communication; this depends on a number of pedagogical considerations.

E. What are learner preferences?

1000 students in elementary and high schools in Israel were given the following questionnaires (2006).

Oral correction

When you make a mistake in class, you think it's best if the teacher ...	very good	good	not very good	bad
1. ... ignores it, doesn't correct at all.				
2. ... indicates there's a mistake, but doesn't actually tell you what's wrong, so you have to work it out for yourself.				
3. ... says what was wrong and tells you what the right version is.				
4. ... says what was wrong, and gets you to say the correct version yourself.				
5. ... says what was wrong and gets someone else to say the correct version.				
6. ... explains why it was wrong, what the rule is.				

Written correction

When you make a mistake in a written assignment, you think it's best if the teacher ...	very good	good	not very good	bad
1. ... ignores it, doesn't correct at all?				
2. ... indicates there's a mistake (e.g. underlines it), but doesn't actually tell you what's wrong, so you have to work it out ?				
3. ... tells you what's wrong (e.g. 'Spelling') but doesn't actually give you the correct version, so you have to work it out yourself?				
4. ... writes in what it ought to be?				
5. ... corrects (any of the ways 2-4 above) but doesn't make you write out the correct version?				
6. ... corrects (any of the ways 2-4 above) and makes you rewrite correctly?				

Conclusion 4: The results of this survey indicated that

- students are overwhelmingly in favour of being corrected;
- they prefer explicit teacher correction and explanation;
- they do not like being corrected by peers;
- they appreciate the value of rewriting on the basis of corrections.

SUMMARY

It is helpful to distinguish between 'correct' and 'incorrect' forms rather than 'variants' in the English classroom.

It is on the whole helpful to provide corrective feedback in order to help students master correct forms.

The most effective corrective feedback is explicit and involves some student processing.

Learners on the whole want to be corrected, and prefer explicit teacher correction.

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