

Castaway?

Chris Payne casts a questioning eye over error correction.

Error correction of both oral and written mistakes occupies a prominent place in ELT literature, and continues to be a divisive issue. The correction of students' mistakes encompasses a wide range of points to consider. Some of the main ones are: *What to correct? Who corrects? Which correction techniques to use? When to correct?* And even: *Should we correct?* In the interests of brevity, this article will focus solely on speech errors, and on two correction techniques: recasts (or reformulation) and explicit correction (or direct feedback).

Recasts

Recasts are an attempt to imitate the way in which real-life correction happens. Typically, it is the way people in the street or in shops react to learners' errors, and is generally how parents correct their children. Recasts are an indirect and gentle way of giving feedback, in which the teacher reformulates all or part of an utterance into a correct or more appropriate version of what a learner is trying to say. For example:

Student: *I go to the cinema last night.*

Teacher: *You went to the cinema. What did you see?*

Student: *'Avatar'.*

In this example, the teacher supplies the correct form (*went*) without interrupting the flow of speech, thus maintaining a focus on meaning.

I have chosen to focus on recasts because they have been observed to occur in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) classrooms more frequently than any other correction technique. Among prevailing correction procedures, recasts are deemed to be an effective way of providing learners with the opportunity to notice how their

interlanguage compares with what competent speakers say. I am sure that the fact that they do not disrupt communication also accounts for their popularity amongst teachers who adopt a communicative approach.

Explicit correction

Explicit correction is when the teacher intervenes by pointing out where and how learners are wrong. It can also entail asking the student to repeat the corrected version of an utterance. A compelling reason and justification for sometimes giving explicit correction is simply that many learners expect or want their errors to be corrected in this way. Maybe this is because it reflects the traditional view of what a teacher does. These days, students often complain about not being corrected enough – rarely about being corrected too much!

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Errors and mistakes

It is common in ELT circles to make a distinction between errors and mistakes. It is not my intention here to analyse different kinds of errors of lexis, grammar and pronunciation, and their cause, so I use the terms *error* and *mistake* interchangeably.

It is useful for teachers to know whether a mistake is due to an over-

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generalisation of a rule, a developmental error, an omission, the result of transfer from the learner's L1 or a covert mistake. A covert mistake is when the student says something which is grammatically correct, but is not what they meant. For example, if a student asks *How long are you in London?* do they mean: *How long are you going to stay in London?* or *How long have you been in London?* As the former is a more colloquial form, the latter is probably what was intended.

ESL and EFL

Perhaps it is not so common to distinguish between ESL and EFL classrooms when we consider correction, but I believe the distinction is of interest for our use of recasts. First, we will look at recasts in the ESL classroom, and then we will consider if it is politic to use them to the same degree in the EFL classroom.

English as a Second Language refers to English as it is learnt by people resident in countries such as the UK, the USA or Australia, where English is generally the language of the community.

Stephen Krashen's input hypothesis states that children acquire their first language by understanding 'comprehensible input', that is, language which is a little above their existing understanding and from which they can infer meaning. In Krashen's view, comprehensible input is also what is needed for students to acquire English as a second language. He suggests that when learners make a mistake, the teacher should respond with a recast which exposes the students to language just above their current level of English. Krashen believes that explicit correction of speech errors can have a detrimental effect on the students' willingness to try to express themselves, and appears to have very little effect on language acquisition.

Richard Schmidt (quoted by Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada) emphasises the role of 'noticing' in language acquisition, and asserts that we acquire language by consciously noticing and paying attention to it. It could be argued that the effectiveness of using recasts stands or falls on the ability of the learner to notice the reformulated language. Some

researchers claim that students frequently fail to notice recasts as correction, and assume that the teacher is responding to the content rather than the form of their speech. If learners in an ESL classroom do not notice recasts and receive no explicit correction, they may still be considered fortunate as they do not wholly depend on the teacher for exposure to English. Once they are outside the classroom, they have ample opportunity for multiple exposure to English, which can facilitate noticing and subsequently the acquisition of natural-sounding and correct language.

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English as a Foreign Language refers to English as it is studied in non-English-speaking countries, such as Germany, Japan or Brazil. In an EFL setting, learners have far less opportunity to notice language used naturally outside the classroom, as their exposure to English will often be minimal. If these learners, who mostly depend on the classroom for exposure to English, are corrected using recasts and these recasts go unnoticed, vital learning opportunities can be missed. In this case, they and their ESL counterparts will benefit from receiving 'negative evidence', that is, direct feedback about what it is not possible to say. In fact, some researchers have reacted to the trend towards CLT and have expressed the concern that a lack of explicit correction will result in early fossilisation of errors. A fossilised error is one that has become a permanent feature of a learner's interlanguage and is at risk of becoming resistant to teaching.

Fluency and accuracy

Most of us adopt a sensible policy of selective correction, and we attach more importance to errors that obscure meaning and, consequently, affect or impede communication. The usual

advice for teachers is to distinguish between accuracy and fluency activities. Conventional ELT wisdom suggests that if the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is likely to be useful, but we shouldn't interfere or interrupt our learners during fluency activities. With fluency activities, we usually delay giving feedback until the end of the activity so as not to disrupt communication. The problem with the accuracy or fluency distinction is that it is based on the teacher's attitude to mistakes and not on learning styles. It is unlikely that our learners think in terms of fluency and accuracy, and some of them prefer to be corrected consistently. If students are interested in being accurate all the time, they will not necessarily appreciate our attempts to encourage them to talk freely in a fluency activity.

What and when

It is unfashionable to point out that explicit correction has a role to play during fluency activities as well as after them. If intelligibility is jeopardised, on-the-spot correction is often precisely what is needed to make the learners notice an error at the exact moment it occurs. An analogy with learning to drive a car helps illustrate this point. A learner driver who makes a mistake during a driving lesson is more likely to notice the correction if it is given while the driver is focused on driving, rather than after the lesson. Likewise, many language learners notice errors more if these are pointed out explicitly while the learners are focused on communicating, rather than having them reformulated or corrected later.

Sense and sensitivity

Corrective feedback of any kind could give rise to a number of potential problems, and the two techniques mentioned also have drawbacks of

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which we ought to be aware. If explicit correction is not handled sensitively, it could create an atmosphere of stress and anxiety in the classroom, and could even demotivate students and deter them from wanting to speak in English. Recasts will not usually impact negatively on students' confidence to communicate, but they have disadvantages of a different nature. Apart from the danger of them not being noticed, the use of recasts assumes a basic interaction between the teacher and the student. The teacher must actually be talking to the student

Whichever correction technique we prefer, we need to think about the effect of our feedback on the student being corrected, and on other members of the class

to be able to reformulate. It would be strange and unnatural to reformulate the utterances of two students who are talking to each other. This is basically common sense. Another point to consider is that if teachers recast just one part of an utterance, they could unwittingly produce language with the correct form, but which would rarely be said. We can take an example from Mark Bartram and Richard Walton's excellent book *Correction*:

Student: *I'm keen on go to the cinema this evening.*

The temptation here is to correct *go* to *going* and thus recast the sentence as *I'm keen on going to the cinema this evening*. While this is superficially correct, it might be a better idea to recast the whole sentence as a native speaker would actually express the idea. For example, *I feel like going to the cinema tonight* or *I fancy going to the cinema tonight*.

The meaning and the message

Some teachers also use peer correction and are in favour of fostering heuristic skills and getting students to self-correct. But whichever correction

technique we prefer, we need to think about the effect of our feedback on the student being corrected, and on other members of the class who might process the feedback. We must also remember that, when learners are communicating in English, their priority is to get their message across, and that the meaning of their utterances is important – not just our teaching objectives.

Jim Cummins and Chris Davison report that '*recent experimental classroom studies have revealed that more explicit types of feedback can lead to higher levels of accuracy and development than implicit types of feedback in the form of recasts*'.



I believe that if students are receptive to recasts, their usefulness as a correction technique is not in dispute. However, in an EFL environment in which the learners receive just a few hours a week of classroom exposure to English, explicit correction can significantly expedite the process of language learning by providing direct feedback about rules and the limits of language use.

Some teachers in a CLT classroom readily embrace the idea of fluency over accuracy. But a desire for fluency in a communicative approach does not excuse us from trying our utmost to help our learners also to develop high levels of accuracy in the use of grammar, lexis and pronunciation. I suggest that when used wisely, a balance between recasts and other corrective feedback is in our students' best interests. 

Cummins, J and Davison, C *International Handbook of English Language Teaching* Springer 2007

Bartram, M and Walton, R *Correction* Thomson Heinle 2002

Lightbown, P and Spada, N *How Languages are Learned* OUP 1999



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TALKBACK!

In Issue 79 of *ETP*, John Potts ('Language log') cites a number of examples of conditional sentences that don't follow the patterns found in ELT coursebooks. His article reminds us that grammar books are an attempt to describe how the language is used and cannot be expected to cover all possible permutations.

It is useful to begin by teaching a limited number of forms to help students express themselves in English. However, sooner or later they are likely to come across other variations. Potts' examples, seen alongside corpus lists, make it clear that the teaching of three particular conditionals doesn't provide learners with the whole picture. As students progress, it may be useful to teach the use of *would* for something unlikely and *would have* for a possibility that didn't happen, while other tenses can be used as usual.

Potts wonders why *if + would* is more common in American than in British English. This can be explained by the influence of German, which uses both equivalent forms (*hätte* and *haben würde*). Not only are German and English both derived from West Germanic, but American English is also subject to greater modern German influence from the large numbers of German speakers who crossed the Atlantic. Another example is the use of the simple past and present perfect tenses, eg American *I already did it* and *He just arrived* versus British *I've already done it* and *He's just arrived*. Again, modern German retains both equivalent forms. This all goes to show that multiple forms are the norm and the grammar found in textbooks does not cover all acceptable variations.

Other rules popularised by ELT coursebooks also give the impression that other forms are not acceptable. Some go on for pages about the sequence of tenses in reported speech, leaving students frustrated when native speakers say *He said he's coming* rather than *He said he was coming*. As with conditionals, these tenses are simply being used in the normal way, one being about the future and one about the past.

Perhaps the solution is to teach learners forms they can use to express themselves, but point out that others are also in use. They may discover this for themselves, and can use corpus websites and dictionaries which refer to usage from corpora to extend their knowledge.

While it is convenient to describe certain grammar rules that help learners communicate, they should be made aware that native speakers of English may use many patterns to express the same ideas.

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