Embracing Errors and Corrective Feedback

Errors are excellent! Anytime we are learning a new skill, we're going to make errors. It's a natural part of learning. When we make an error and learn how to fix it, it's an opportunity for learning to occur. Whatever level of ESL learners you are working with, you're going to encounter errors. If you have learners who never make any errors when speaking or writing English, you should take a closer look at their learning. No errors may indicate the content of the class is too easy for them, or that they are so worried about making errors, they never say or write anything until they are 100% sure it's perfect. We learn language by making errors and getting feedback from the people around us, so learners who are afraid of errors often progress more slowly than learners who are willing to take risks.

Create a Culture of Learning

One ESL teacher praises her learner's errors, saying "That was a beautiful mistake! or I love that error; it shows me that you are trying, and are headed in the right direction." Learners in her class know that they won't be criticized for making errors, and are willing to speak up and experiment with language. You don't have to praise every error, but be aware of how you are responding to them. Try to use positive language. Rather than saying, "This is wrong" try saying "This isn't quite right" or "There's a better way to say this." Rather than saying "I see a problem in this sentence" try saying "Very good! I see one thing you'll want to change" or "Almost perfect, let's look at this one word."

It can be helpful for learners to be reminded that learning a language is difficult and it's normal to struggle. Make sure you are being patient with learners and ask them to be patient with themselves and with one another. Don't be afraid to share stories about challenges you've experienced when you've learned a new language or a new skill, and don't act embarrassed or try to hide errors that you make when teaching.

Showing that you make errors can help to normalize errors and encourage persistence. Avoid telling learners that lessons or activities are going to be easy or that they're going to finish them quickly. Those types of projected expectations can make learners afraid to admit they find something difficult. Treat errors as opportunities for learning and remind learners that making errors will help them to grow.

Types of Feedback

Feedback can be positive or corrective. Positive feedback is extremely important. It keeps learners motivated and lets them know you are recognizing their hard work and their successes. Corrective feedback helps learners to improve their language skills, helps to develop memory and attention to specific aspects of the language and lets learners know where to focus their attention. Both types of feedback are essential, but some teachers are unsure of how to provide corrective feedback without discouraging learners. Let's look at some suggestions for giving feedback effectively.

Tips for Giving Positive Feedback

When giving positive feedback, keep in mind that blanket statements such as *Good job everyone!* or *You did great!* can easily be overused and feel like empty praise. Try to give positive feedback that is specific to what you see the learner or the class doing. *I'm very impressed- I just heard everyone speak English for five minutes straight!* or *This is a really good topic sentence* or *I heard you explaining your answer to your partner in English, that's really great!* is going to mean more to learners than a generic *Good job*. Also, try to avoid praising intelligence. Telling learners they are really smart can make them wary of asking for help because they think admitting that they don't understand something will make them look less intelligent. Instead of saying *You're really good at this* or *You're really smart,* praise the effort learners put into their work. For example, try saying *I see that you wrote extra sentences with the vocabulary words at home! Awesome! It's great that you are doing extra practice* or *I hear you speaking more English than you did two months ago. I can tell that you're really trying.* Learners often don't feel like they can control their intelligence, but understand that they can control their effort.

Tips for Giving Corrective Feedback

It's important to give corrective feedback to adult ESL learners, but too much can be overwhelming and cause learners to shut down and stop trying. It's hard to be motivated when you feel like you can't do anything right! Rather than correcting every single error, provide focused error correction. Correct errors that pertain to the language or grammar point that the learners are practicing, and let less important errors go (unless the errors prevent learners from being understood by the listener or reader). It's helpful to let learners know what you'll focus on before the start of the activity, and that you won't correct every single error. For example, you might say, *While you're writing, I'm going to be checking your spelling of the new words and that you capitalize your sentences correctly* or *I'm going to come around and check that everyone is using the past tense.*

If a learner makes an error that should be corrected, there are a variety of options for how to respond. **Verbal Models** involve repeating back correct language, and are used most frequently when learners are speaking or reading aloud. They are less effective when giving feedback on written work. **Prompts** involve asking a question or a series of questions to encourage the learners to notice and correct errors. They may also include a non-verbal prompt, such as a confused look to indicate a misunderstanding, or a gesture backwards over a shoulder to encourage a learner to use the past tense. Prompts work well for spoken and written errors. **Direct Correction** is straightforward. It lets the learners know that they've made a mistake and where exactly it occurred. Direct correction works well for both spoken and written errors.

Read the examples of each method in the chart below, and learn about the advantages and disadvantages of using each type of corrective feedback in the ESL classroom. As you read, put a checkmark next to the types of corrective feedback that you use in your own teaching.

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Verbal Models		
Rephrasing	The teacher rephrases the learner's sentence from their point of view, adjusting for grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.	L: *I have went there two times.* T: *I see. You've been there two times.*
Restating	The teacher repeats the learner's sentence using the correct grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.	L: *She have a good job.* T: *She HAS a good job. She has.*
Advantages: Very subtle, doesn't interrupt the flow of conversation. Provides an accurate model of the target language. Used with spoken language, not written.		**Disadvantages:** Very subtle, learners often don't realize they've been corrected, particularly for beginning-level learners. Can be difficult for all learners to hear pronunciation of certain sounds (past tense –ed or the plural –s).
Prompts		
Repetition	The teacher repeats the sentence and highlights the error by emphasizing the incorrect word and using rising intonation.	L: *I will showed you.* T: *I will SHOWED you?* L: *I will show you.*
Elicitation	The corrector repeats part of the sentence and uses rising intonation to signal the learner should complete it.	L: *I'll come if it no rain.* T: *I'll come if it ……?*
Targeted Question	The teacher asks one or several questions to encourage the learner/s to check their work or notice a specific feature.	T: *Does your sentence look the same or different than the example?* T: *WHEN did you live in Texas?*
Either/Or	The teacher says the incorrect version of the sentence and contrasts it with the correct version.	T: *Do we say "She no like pizza, or she doesn't like pizza?"*
Advantages: The learner is figuring out the error and correction themselves, so the feedback is more likely to stick. Encourages self-reliance and is overt.		**Disadvantages:** Can be time-consuming. Can be frustrating if the learner isn't able to respond to the prompt and find and correct their error.
Direct Correction		
Targeted Correction	The teacher indicates an error has happened and identifies where the error occurred.	T: *Let's look at your sentence. You need to make one change. I <u>mmm</u> home every day.*
Explicit Correction	The teacher indicates an error has happened, identifies the error and provides the correction.	L: *On May.* T: *Not on May, In May. We say, It will start in May.*
Advantages: The learner knows that error correction is happening and where to focus their attention.		**Disadvantages:** Overuse can cause the learner/s to rely on the teacher to identify and correct all of their mistakes.

Corrective Feedback Scenarios

Now that we've learned about tips for giving effective feedback and different methods that we can use, let's see some examples of how this can work in a classroom.

Scenario 1:

Level: Low Intermediate

Activity: Writing sentences about work experience using the past tense

Error: A learner writes, *In Columbia I teach people to have good health for bodies and be happy*.

Feedback Suggestion: Use **Targeted Questions** to address the verb tense error; let the other grammatical errors pass. *This is a really good long sentence. Remember that we're writing about your job in the past.* This could be followed by: *What is the verb? Is there anything that you need to change?*

Scenario 2:

Level: Pre-Beginning

Activity: Learners work in partners. One partner holds up a picture of a family member, and the other partner says the vocabulary word associated with the picture.

Error: A learner says *Grandmother* when shown a picture of a grandfather. Their partner doesn't offer a correction.

Feedback Suggestion: Use **Repetition** to give feedback without a lot of additional teacher talk. Point to the picture and says, *Grandmother?* while looking confused. If the learner doesn't respond, move to an **Either/Or** prompt. *Is this a man or a woman? Right. Is this a grandmother, or a grandfather?*

Scenario 3:

Level: Advanced

Activity: Composing a short speech using transitional phrases between the main points.

Error: A learner practicing out loud says, *Global warming is making the sea levels rise to reCORD highs. Furthermore there is more flooding in cities on the coasts.*

Feedback Suggestion: Use **Restating** to begin with more subtle error correction. *CONSEQUENTLY there is more flooding in the cities on the coasts.* If they don't notice, use **Explicit Correction**. *When there is a cause and effect, we use the transitional phrase consequently, not furthermore.*

Also address the mispronunciation of the noun *record* since that may confuse listeners. Use **Targeted Correction** and/or **Targeted Questions** to help them adjust the word stress. *Global warming is making the sea levels rise to mmm highs* or *Are you using record as a noun or a verb? What syllable should you stress?*

Engaging Learners in Corrective Feedback

As teachers and tutors, we want to help learners develop their abilities to monitor and correct their own language production. We want to be **question askers, not just answer givers.** Using prompts to encourage learners to figure out their own mistakes and how to fix them is one way to encourage self-reliance. But sometimes we may not have time to prompt all individuals in a class. Here are a few additional teaching techniques that you can use to encourage learners to become more independent.

Check and Annotate Own Work

Ask learners to review their own work before they ask the teacher or a classroom assistant for help. Explicitly teach some annotation strategies learners can use when reviewing their work with (underline or circle words or phrases they are unsure of, put a ? next to the worksheet items they have questions about, etc.). This helps direct the teacher's attention to where the learners are struggling.

Compare Answers with a Partner or Small Group

As learners complete a writing activity or a worksheet, have them pair up or get into small groups to compare answers or check each other's writing. If they are working on a worksheet, they can ask the teacher about responses that they aren't able to come to a consensus on. If they are checking writing, explicitly teach some feedback phrases, such as: *I think that you should change…* or *In my opinion, this should say…* or *Let's check the dictionary for the spelling of…*

Circle Back

When floating during classroom activities, use prompts to encourage learners to make corrections. Tell learners you will check back in with them in a few minutes to see if they made the necessary changes, and to answer any questions. Encourage learners try to figure it out their errors and how to fix the errors themselves before moving to direct correction.

Whole Class Corrections

When floating during classroom activities, take note of the errors learners are making. Write the examples with errors on the board, and invite the whole class to figure out the error and make corrections together. Don't single out individual learners, but let the class know that you see a lot of people making the same errors.

The Teacher is Wrong!

When writing on the board or talking to the class, make deliberate errors with familiar language and grammar, and ask the learners to give you corrective feedback.

Ask Learners for Feedback Preferences

As you get to know the learners in your class, ask how they prefer to receive feedback. Some learners may want a lot of errors corrected and may be comfortable getting feedback in front of the class, while others may prefer one-on-one feedback. It's always a good idea to ask if you're unsure.

Reading Reflection Questions:

1. What are two ways that you will promote a culture of learning while teaching?

2. What is one tip for giving positive feedback that you will implement in your teaching? Why did you choose it? What is one tip for giving corrective feedback? Why did you choose it?

3. You are teaching the present continuous tense (to be + verb + ing) to a class of eight beginning level learners. You write *We _____ English (learn)* on the board and ask a learner to come up to the board and complete the sentence with the present continuous form of the verb in the parentheses. The learner writes *We is learning   English.* How would you give them corrective feedback?

4. What is one method for involving learners in giving feedback that you would like to try out in your teaching? Why?

Error Correction and Feedback: Video Reflection Questions

Classroom Video 1: Beginning Level

What types of error correction did you see the teacher use during the activities? Check all that apply (if you hear a type of correction more than once, you can make checkmarks below the box to tally how often it's used).

Verbal Models	Prompts	Direct Correction
☐ Rephrasing: *The teacher rephrases the learner's sentence from their point of view, adjusting for grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.* ☐ Restating: *The teacher repeats the learner's sentence using the correct grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.*	☐ Repetition: *The teacher repeats the sentence and highlights the error by emphasizing the incorrect word and using rising intonation.* ☐ Elicitation: *The corrector repeats part of the sentence and uses rising intonation to signal the learner should complete it.* ☐ Targeted Question: *The teacher asks one or several questions to encourage the learner/s to check their work or notice a specific feature.* ☐ Either/Or: *The teacher says the incorrect version of the sentence and contrasts it with the correct version.*	☐ Targeted Correction: *The teacher indicates an error has happened and identifies where the error occurred.* ☐ Explicit Correction: *The teacher indicates an error has happened, identifies the error and provides the correction.*

What error correction methods did the teacher use most often (verbal models, prompts or direct correction)? What types did they use the most often (rephrasing, elicitation, explicit correction, etc.)?

How effective was the error correction? How did the learners respond?

How did the teacher deliver positive feedback? How did the learners respond?

Is there anything you would like to "steal" from the teacher to incorporate into your own teaching (e.g. classroom management)?

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Error Correction and Feedback: Video Reflection Questions

Classroom Video 2: High Beginning Level

What types of error correction did you see the teacher use during the activities? Check all that apply (if you hear a type of correction more than once, you can make checkmarks below the box to tally how often it's used).

Verbal Models	**Prompts**	**Direct Correction**
☐ Rephrasing: *The teacher rephrases the learner's sentence from their point of view, adjusting for grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.* ☐ Restating: *The teacher repeats the learner's sentence using the correct grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.*	☐ Repetition: *The teacher repeats the sentence and highlights the error by emphasizing the incorrect word and using rising intonation.* ☐ Elicitation: *The corrector repeats part of the sentence and uses rising intonation to signal the learner should complete it.* ☐ Targeted Question: *The teacher asks one or several questions to encourage the learner/s to check their work or notice a specific feature.* ☐ Either/Or: *The teacher says the incorrect version of the sentence and contrasts it with the correct version.*	☐ Targeted Correction: *The teacher indicates an error has happened and identifies where the error occurred.* ☐ Explicit Correction: *The teacher indicates an error has happened, identifies the error and provides the correction.*

What error correction methods did the teacher use most often (verbal models, prompts or direct correction)? What types did they use the most often (rephrasing, elicitation, explicit correction, etc.)?

How effective was the error correction? How did the learners respond?

How did the teacher deliver positive feedback? How did the learners respond?

Is there anything you would like to "steal" from the teacher to incorporate into your own teaching (e.g. classroom management)?

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Error Correction and Feedback: Video Reflection Questions

Classroom Video 3: Intermediate Level

What types of error correction did you see the teacher use during the activities? Check all that apply (if you hear a type of correction more than once, you can make checkmarks below the box to tally how often it's used).

Verbal Models	Prompts	Direct Correction
☐ Rephrasing: *The teacher rephrases the learner's sentence from their point of view, adjusting for grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.* ☐ Restating: *The teacher repeats the learner's sentence using the correct grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.*	☐ Repetition: *The teacher repeats the sentence and highlights the error by emphasizing the incorrect word and using rising intonation.* ☐ Elicitation: *The corrector repeats part of the sentence and uses rising intonation to signal the learner should complete it.* ☐ Targeted Question: *The teacher asks one or several questions to encourage the learner/s to check their work or notice a specific feature.* ☐ Either/Or: *The teacher says the incorrect version of the sentence and contrasts it with the correct version.*	☐ Targeted Correction: *The teacher indicates an error has happened and identifies where the error occurred.* ☐ Explicit Correction: *The teacher indicates an error has happened, identifies the error and provides the correction.*

What error correction methods did the teacher use most often (verbal models, prompts or direct correction)? What types did they use the most often (rephrasing, elicitation, explicit correction, etc.)?

How effective was the error correction? How did the learners respond?

How did the teacher deliver positive feedback? How did the learners respond?

Is there anything you would like to "steal" from the teacher to incorporate into your own teaching (e.g. classroom management)?

What are your top three takeaways from the video?

What methods and types of error correction do you want to use the next time you teach? What methods of positive feedback?

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Giving Error Correction and Feedback: Your Turn!

Think of the next time that you will be in the classroom. Select a time during the class that you will be able to give error correction and feedback. It can be during a whole class explanation, while floating during an activity, when leading a small group, etc. Choose what errors you will focus on.

During the chosen time, pay attention to the types of error correction and feedback you give. After class, check off what types you use the most.

Verbal Models	Prompts	Direct Correction
☐ Rephrasing: *The teacher rephrases the learner's sentence from their point of view, adjusting for grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.* ☐ Restating: *The teacher repeats the learner's sentence using the correct grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, etc.*	☐ Repetition: *The teacher repeats the sentence and highlights the error by emphasizing the incorrect word and using rising intonation.* ☐ Elicitation: *The corrector repeats part of the sentence and uses rising intonation to signal the learner should complete it.* ☐ Targeted Question: *The teacher asks one or several questions to encourage the learner/s to check their work or notice a specific feature.* ☐ Either/Or: *The teacher says the incorrect version of the sentence and contrasts it with the correct version.*	☐ Targeted Correction: *The teacher indicates an error has happened and identifies where the error occurred.* ☐ Explicit Correction: *The teacher indicates an error has happened, identifies the error and provides the correction.*

How effective was the error correction? What other methods will you try in your future teaching?

How effective was the positive feedback? Were you following the suggestions from the reading? What other methods will you try in your future teaching?

Select a method for engaging learners in corrective feedback that you will try the next time you teach. When finished, reflect on how the learners responded. Remember, when introducing a new method, it may take several classes before the learners are fully comfortable with it.

☐ Check and Annotate Own Work
☐ Compare Answers with a Partner or Small Group
☐ Circle Back
☐ Whole Class Corrections
☐ The Teacher is Wrong!

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