

What's the best way to correct student mistakes?

Explanation [662 words, not counting the references]

Many debates characterize the field of ELT, but few are as enduring as the debate about error correction in oral communication. When and how should we correct student mistakes? Consider the following conversation in a grammar class. The students have completed a lesson in *Grammar Explorer 1* focused on past tense. The topic of the lesson was travel experiences.

13 APPLY.

A In your notebook, use the words to make a list of typical travel problems. Use the simple past.

1. I / get / sick. <i>I got sick.</i>	5. I / get on / the wrong plane, train, bus, etc.
2. I / lose / my passport, wallet, etc.	6. I / not bring / not pack / the right clothes
3. Someone / take / my passport, wallet, etc.	7. My luggage / not arrive
4. I / miss / the plane, train, bus, etc.	

B Did you have any of the problems from exercise A on your last trip? Look at your list from exercise A. Check (✓) the problems you had.

C Work with a partner. Tell your partner about your experience. Where was it? When? What happened? Use the simple past.

I was on a beach in France. I went in the water, and someone took my bag. . . .

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The sentence cues in Part A give students practice generating past tense verbs in collocations related to travel mishaps. Now they are in pairs (Part C) talking about their own travel experiences and mishaps.

Jason: I went to Portland, and I lost my credit card.
 Wan: That's too bad.
 Jason: Yes, but a man find it and take it to bank.
 Wan: So nice.
 Jason: I was very happy.

As a teacher overhearing this, I have two questions to consider. First, *is it a good idea to interrupt the flow of their conversation?* Many teachers would say no. This is a communicative activity. The focus is on fluency, not accuracy. Some teachers might add that the mistakes in grammar are not causing any problems in communication for these students. A third argument against interrupting might be that correcting Jason won't make any difference in his acquisition.

I understand these arguments. However, this is an ESL class. In an ESL setting, students have lots of opportunities to develop fluency, but relatively few opportunities to receive feedback on accuracy. Why have the activity during class if not to take advantage of the opportunity to give

feedback? Try asking your students, “Do you want me to correct your mistakes?” Of course, they do.

The second question is this: *What is the most effective way to correct student mistakes?* One option is to note student errors and write them on the board for everyone to look at after the discussion ends. This gives students an opportunity to edit common errors, ones that they generated themselves, and it doesn’t disrupt the flow of communication. However, it doesn’t capitalize on the opportunity for individual “point of need” feedback. There are two common ways to give this immediate, individualized feedback: *recast* and *prompts*. Recast is the reformulation of the student utterance without directly indicating that there is an error. The conversation above with a recast might go something like this:

Jason: I went to Portland, and I lost my credit card.
 Wan: That's too bad.
 Jason: But a man find it and take it to bank.
 Teacher: A man found it and took it to the bank?
 Jason: Yes. I was very happy.
 Wan: So nice.

In a recast, the teacher corrects the error within the flow of the conversation. As you can see from the conversation above, however, the student may not always recognize the correction, particularly students with low proficiency. They may interpret a recast as a request for clarification. In contrast, a *prompt* does not reformulate the student’s utterance. A prompt signals students to self-correct. The conversation above with prompts might be:

Jason: I went to Portland, and I lost my credit card.
 Wan: That's too bad.
 Jason: But a man find it and take it to bank.
 Wan: So nice.
 Teacher: A man ...?
 Jason: Oh. A man found it and take...took it to bank.
 Teacher: Right. That's really nice that he took it to the bank.
 Jason: Yes. I was very happy.
 Wan: So nice.

There are many different kinds of prompts: nonverbal and verbal, with or without information about the type of error the student made. Research studies have found that prompts are more effective than recasts with low proficiency students for two reasons: (1) students clearly understand that they have made errors, and (2) they have an opportunity to repair the errors. Researchers hypothesize that acquisition is improved because of the cognitive processes involved in retrieving and processing information, and then producing the target structure.

In conclusion, an important aspect of “applying” grammar is receiving feedback on mistakes and having opportunities to self-correct.

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