

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Social Media Numbers by Joanne Mitten

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Acknowledgements by Editor, Peter Lahiff

info.eltireland@gmail.com @ELTIreland

elt-ireland.com

students record their own rendering of samples of native speech and then listen to the two once again for comparison and corrections. Auditory learners rely mainly on what the ear registers and are capable of correct imitation of auditory input. As such, they will benefit from such activities as minimal pairs, where two words are juxtaposed to demonstrate the difference in the pronunciation of a pair of sounds, usually vowels, or they will use tongue twisters. They can be used to practise the pronunciation of either one or a group of sounds. Also, they lend themselves as a useful diagnostic tool, where a teacher can notice the mispronunciations of certain sounds incidentally to the pronunciation of the sounds that were intended in a given tongue twister.

It should be noted that modality, or the division into particular learning preferences discussed above, does not appear in isolation, in other words, a given modality is normally supported by another one. Thus a student whose main modality is visual will rely on the so called subsidiary one, either auditory or kinaesthetic. Such a combination makes a teacher's job easier in the sense that activities that have been prepared with one specific preference in mind will also prove beneficial to students with a different major modality.

Brain-friendly activities that cater for different learning preferences in learners in teaching pronunciation seem to offer a comprehensive solution for either novice teachers who may still lack the necessary experience and knowledge and consequently feel they are not well-prepared for the task of providing successful instruction in their pronunciation classes or they can be used by those teachers who are looking for innovative ideas to use with their students. The suggested activities involve both the left and the right brain hemispheres in that students at any point can ask the teacher for explanation or clarification or any other required feedback. They will apply techniques of using visuals such as mind-maps, diagrams, charts, or colouring. They will engage their bodies and apply different senses in the learning process. Finally, such pronunciation classes can be fun, and learning in a relaxed, low-anxiety context is considered to be much more effective and successful.

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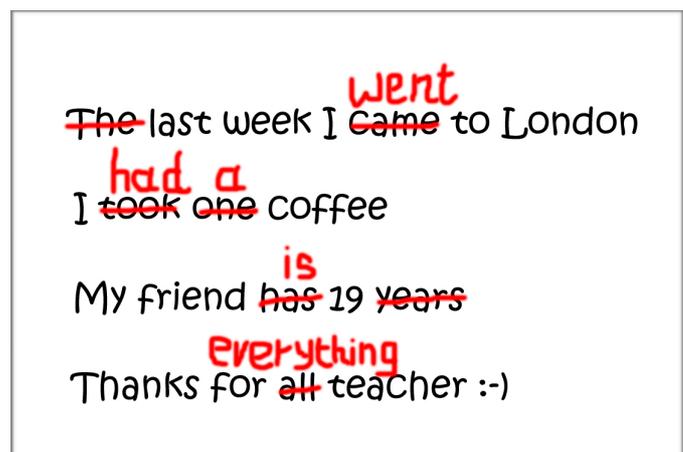
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We all make mistakes!

by John Ryan (English Hour)

Accuracy is obviously an important part of speaking a language. Some English teachers might say that not making mistakes is important, but at the same time students shouldn't worry too much about it as long as their mistakes don't affect understanding. After all, it's about communicating ideas primarily, and accuracy can always come a happy second. In my experience, though, students don't really accept this idea (they want to speak correctly!), and I think rightly so.

After all, people worry about the impressions they make. Whether it's a good impression in a first meeting or the impression you give people generally, we have an image of ourselves which we want to portray. We want to be seen as dynamic and/or successful people. We want to be seen as intelligent and educated people. We don't want to be seen as someone who makes mistakes.



Red pen ready

Pic by author

In our English language school system here in Ireland, I would hazard a guess that the vast majority of learners are young people about to embark on their careers. They are told that they need English to get a job or a promotion. They have to ace interviews and then go on to deal professionally with colleagues and clients: all through English. Being able to perform the tasks within their role is not enough. It must be accompanied by an ability to successfully communicate through English.

The result of this is students saying “please correct me” to the teacher, although this can present a dilemma. On one hand, the teacher wants to correct the learner to promote accuracy in the language. On the other hand, they don’t want to undermine the learner’s confidence and correct too much. Correct to a point and let the other stuff go. Tomorrow is another day.

So as teachers, we don’t want to correct students every time we hear a mistake. But there are times we most certainly do correct. And one of those times is when we hear the common mistake. These are mistakes which are ingrained in learners (often) of particular nationalities. They are mistakes which the same (nationality) learners make again and again. Take the following as an example: *I want that he pays me now.*

As far as communication is concerned, the speaker has been successful. We understand them perfectly. However, I would argue that to let it go is not serving the learner’s best interests. It is a commonly used form, and the learner is likely to repeat it in a real-world situation if it goes unchecked. If they use it in a professional situation, at a meeting for example, it gives an impression of them that they themselves probably wouldn’t want if they were aware of it. What I’m trying to say is, that as teachers we owe it to the learner to enhance the way they communicate.

The great thing is that there is payback for the teacher too. Correcting errors opens doors which have some very interesting language items to explore on the other side. Open the door, take some steps (how many according to the level you are teaching) and then go back and move on. This makes for an interesting class. Timing, of course, is everything and you may prefer to ignore an error for the sake of communication, when there is great interaction. Error correction should not interfere with positive momentum achieved thus far but should complement it at the right time.

“Correcting errors opens doors which have some very interesting language items to explore on the other side.”

An error which I think should always be corrected is when the learner makes a mistake using the target language being specifically dealt with in the class. If the class has a grammar theme, for example future forms, the teacher should be dealing with issues which arise around this area of grammar. Again, apart from the timing of the correction, level plays a key role in what to correct and how far to go with it.

So with these errors in mind, how should we as teachers go about correcting them? There are of course a variety of ways. Some teachers can correct as they hear them (when appropriate) and some will gather them for a language focus session at the end of the class. Some teachers will advocate peer correction and some will create a task around them for the next session. There are many ways, and many are valid. The important thing is that the teacher promotes understanding in the learner. They must present the language in context and show the learner why one form is used while another is not. The key, then, is that once the learner has understanding, the teacher then facilitates the learner to use the target language as much as possible through tasks, eliciting or homework. The key to language learning is production on the learner’s part.

In my experience of observing teachers, I have found that the most successful ones are the teachers who ‘sit’ on the target language, rather than moving on too quickly. This means that they stop a moment and open the relevant doors for the learner to see how far they can go with a particular structure. The teacher makes the form clear so the learner can produce the target structure accurately but also challenges the learner in real world ways so the language has meaning in a variety of contexts. Basically, it’s playing with language. How long the teacher spends on a structure and how deep they dig depends on the learner’s level.

In the classroom the teacher is the filter. Some things pass and others are stopped and dealt with. Through the teacher, the learner can develop their communication skills to the point where they are making language choices which are appropriate to the situation within which they are communicating. It is the role of the teacher to create those situations and empower the learner towards being the communicator they want to be.