Using Correction in Class

Using correction and feedback in a language class is a somewhat complex topic and, at the same time, a vital part of teaching. This article aims to raise some important issues surrounding this aspect of teaching and provide advice and practical tips on correction and feedback in lessons.

How can language learners be corrected?

In many cases, some teachers may tend to only focus on certain aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling when using correction and feedback. However, the scope should be wider. For instance, in terms of speaking, correction and feedback could also take into account such things as fluency and coherence, and organization and development of ideas. Language is after all complex, so try to consider all aspects of language use when using correction and feedback.

Furthermore, considering how and when the correction and feedback happens is not a simple choice. Are the students doing pair work? Is it a whole-class discussion? Is the activity supposed to be a controlled practice? A warm-up? A brainstorm?

A useful place to start is to categorise correction and feedback into three broad areas: self-correction, peer-correction, and teacher to student correction and feedback.

Self-correction and Feedback

In this approach, students correct mistakes they have made on their own. This makes the correction more memorable for the student, as they work out their mistakes for themselves. This also encourages independence from the teacher and gives the student more motivation and confidence. Furthermore, this helps the student take responsibility for their own learning. Students learn to recognise their own problem areas and gain a better awareness of the language. For example, a student might make a verb tense error and immediately rephrase it, e.g. "Yesterday I go out for lunch… sorry, I went out for lunch." The teacher must allow time for this self-correction to happen and avoid interrupting students in the middle of the communication process.

An easy way to get a student to self-correct when speaking is to respond with, 'Sorry. Could you say that again?' or 'Please, repeat that.' The student will then reformulate their language and in most cases, correct their mistake. If a student is still having problems, you could write the sentence on the board and ask them to find the mistake. You could also leave a blank where the mistake was made and ask the student to fill in the gap.

When you want students to self-correct their writing, write down the number of mistakes they made and indicate the type of mistake. Then have them try to find the mistakes and correct them. Try to limit the focus to only three or four error types such as past tense verb forms, spelling, articles, etc. A page full of red pen marks can often confuse, overwhelm, and discourage students. A similar approach could be to use error correction codes that are written by the teacher as annotations in the original text. An example of an error correction code could be something like 'VT' for verb tense. Upon seeing VT in the annotations, the student should immediately understand that the sentence contains a verb tense error and then try to correct it accordingly.

Another useful way of identifying and providing students with an opportunity to improve their self-correcting skills is through oral production. Recording audio or a video can be employed as a useful feedback tool for students. Just like in any creative endeavour, reviewing, revising, and editing is essential for improvement. This should be no different for productive language skills such as speaking.

A drawback of this approach is that students may not understand how to self-correct or be clear on the correct language to use. This could lead to the reinforcement of errors. There is also a chance that students may not recognize the mistakes they are making. The student may also over-correct or become too self-conscious about errors. It is better for students to use self-correcting with another correcting method. In this way, they get the most benefit.

Self-correction and feedback are usually only effective if they are guided. To guide students through this process, use checklists that break down a skill into its key components. This not only makes self-correction more effective but also more efficient. For example, speaking can often be broken down into these core components:

1. Fluency and coherence

2. Pronunciation

3. Vocabulary range and accuracy

4. Grammatical range and accuracy

From this basic breakdown, a checklist, as in the table below, could be developed by the teacher so that it focuses on particular language use areas. Thus, using this checklist, a student could review a recorded oral presentation rehearsal and check off the points they were able to achieve.

Fluency and Coherence I was able to …	*Pronunciation* I was able to …	*Vocabulary Range and Accuracy* I was able to …	*Grammatical Range and Accuracy* I was able to …
speak for 2 minutes with minimal hesitation and pausing	pronounce most words correctly	use a broad variety of words and phrases	use the appropriate tense
expand key points with either examples or explanations	use stress and intonation effectively	use target vocabulary with accuracy	use a variety of sentence structures
make use of transitions to make clear links between key ideas	be understood despite occasional inaccuracies	use paraphrase when required	avoid making subject verb agreement errors

Checklists provide more controlled and guided self-correction than simply allowing students to correct themselves on the go. In fact, they should also be used in peer-correction, and teacher to student correction and feedback.

Peer Correction and Feedback

In this approach, a student works with another student to correct their mistakes, check their answers, give feedback, or ask questions. Some (if not most) students find it easier to accept corrections and feedback from a classmate than a teacher. This approach works best during pair or group work, when students normally compare answers, do an exercise together or share their thoughts in a speaking activity. As they are not being corrected in front of the whole class, it provides a safer environment, especially for more shy or less confident students who can, thus, have a better opportunity to produce and practice the language.

When students help each other, it encourages them to listen and become more involved in class activities, develop teamwork and support, and a sense of responsibility. It is also beneficial for the student providing the correction as this is a great way for them to consolidate their own understanding of a particular skill or language point. Being able to teach somebody about something is also a confidence booster.

There are some disadvantages to this approach: the students offering the correction can provide the wrong answer, they might not identify the mistakes correctly, or they may not be able to communicate feedback clearly and effectively.

Although these problems could be seen as part of the learning process, it is important that mistakes are not reinforced. Therefore, when students are doing an activity on their own, monitoring becomes one of the teacher's most important skills. Students are likely to make similar mistakes, and these mistakes tend to be picked up during monitoring. In this way, all the students get reinforcement of the correct language.

In using peer correction and feedback, it is best to pair a weaker student with a stronger one. Similarly, for group activities try to have a mix of student abilities. This is so that weaker students actually benefit from the experience, and feedback and correction activities are not cases of 'the blind leading the blind'. It is also important not to always put students in the same groups. This is so that relatively stronger students can have the opportunity to be a mentee rather than always being the mentor.

Teacher to Student Correction and Feedback

This is probably the most common and overused approach to correction and feedback in language teaching. It most commonly involves a teacher identifying mistakes and giving immediate and accurate corrections supported by explanations and examples.

Two effective ways teacher correction and feedback can be used are through modelling and highlighting to catch errors in the early stages before they are repeated by students. The goal here is to avoid the practice of mistakes. For example, if a student gets used to saying, "I have hungry" and keeps repeating that for a long time, it will be harder to correct in the future, as they have already internalized the mistake.

Also, keep in mind the goal of the activity and the skill to be developed. Sometimes it is better to correct the student and provide feedback after their production rather than doing it on the spot, which results in frequent interruptions.

The teacher can also focus on common errors made as a class rather than singling out individual students. This is especially advised for teaching students from cultures in which maintaining 'face' is highly valued.

It is also important to keep in mind that teacher to student correction and feedback creates a teacher-centred classroom. If it is used too often, it might prevent students from noticing their mistakes. Not to mention, it is very demanding on the teacher, who should be performing the role of a moderator or facilitator instead of being a 'correction machine'.

In a more decentralized class setting, using self and peer correction and feedback can be highly effective in not only fostering learner autonomy but also encouraging a more interactive learning environment.

A mistake or a slip?

When discussing the issue of correction, it is also important for the teacher to distinguish a mistake from a slip and handle them differently. This is because it can avoid unnecessary intrusions by the teacher.

A mistake can be considered something the students produce in an incorrect way, which can impact their intended meaning and hinder communication. For example, using wrong verb tenses and mispronunciations are typical mistakes language learners make. They need to be addressed through correction to avoid consolidation and repetition over time.

While also incorrect, slips can be seen as something temporary which students are generally able to pick up and correct themselves. They can be caused by external factors such as anxiety (when making a presentation in front of the class, for example), fatigue or simply lack of attention. For instance, look at the following conversation between a student and a teacher:

Student: I go to work 8 a.m.

Teacher: Oh, I go to work at 8 a.m. too. What time do you start?

Student: I arrive there at 8:30 a.m. and start work at 9 a.m.

Thus, it is important to consider:

• Did the student make a mistake by not using 'at' before '8 a.m.' or was it just a slip?

• Should the teacher have interrupted the conversation to use correction?

• How did the teacher provide correction in this case?

• What might be the goal of this activity, e.g. speaking practice or a grammar exercise?

As you can see, before deciding to intervene and use correction, it is important to be aware of the multiple subtleties involved in an activity. In the example conversation above, while it seems that the teacher is simply conversing with the student, there is more going on. Not only is the teacher paying attention to the student's output, but also providing correction in an effective way - without stopping the flow of what is most likely a free practice speaking activity rather than a controlled activity.

Sometimes a simple gesture is enough to make students aware of a mistake. For example, simply pointing backwards with the thumb can help students realize they should have used the verb in the past simple form.

There is no need to stop the activity, grab the spotlight and start a 10-minute grammar explanation about verb tenses. Maybe the perceived error was just a 'slip' and the students will be able to correct themselves with little input from the teacher or even use the right structure if given another chance to do so.

As a teacher, it is really important to put students' mistakes into context and take into account their level of English and what kind of task they are performing.

What considerations should be given to learning styles when using correction?

People are different and so are their learning styles. Some students may feel intimidated by corrections while others welcome them - they may even make an intentional mistake to check if the teacher is paying attention. For the teacher, 'balance' is the key. Get to know your students and find the best way of using correction and feedback in class.

A suggested approach could be to use peer correction and feedback during activities and teacher to student at the end of the tasks. Start there and make changes as required.

Also consider your students' intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. That is, knowing how to identify if they work better when alone or in groups. This can have a positive impact on the way correction and feedback is used in class.

Students who are intrapersonal (solitary) learners are more likely to benefit from self-correction activities especially due to their self-conscious nature. On the other hand, social learners can be more effective when working and collaborating with their classmates, so peer correction and feedback is ideal for them.

In conclusion, using correction and feedback as a second language teacher is not just simply telling students to do an exercise and reading the answer key afterwards. There are many more aspects to be considered.

Hopefully, this article has given a little insight in how to incorporate correction and feedback into lesson plans more effectively. Try to vary your approach and consider some of the points raised here. This is a well-researched area of second language instruction, so further reading on the topic should prove to be illuminating. Remember that correction and feedback can (and should) be used as positive tools, fostering independent learning in students, and building a more collaborative classroom environment. Sometimes the teacher needs to stand back a little while there are times when the students expect the teacher to take a more hands on approach. Be present, get to know your students and employ the approach the situation demands.