

# Correcting fossilized errors

Some of our most fluent learners have been making the same language mistakes for decades. What strategies can we employ to help them improve accuracy?

An error can be a slip of the tongue, an utterance that comes out wrong in the heat of the moment, something that can happen to learners and native speakers alike. It's a mistake that is quickly corrected. When a speaker makes a mistake repeatedly, however, despite correction, the error is what is called "fossilized". In other words, we are dealing with a language mistake that the learner has made so often that it sounds correct to them.

Learners typically make mistakes when transferring knowledge from their first language to their second language. This is called negative transfer. How often have you heard your learners say things like this: "I learn English since ten years." – "What means this?" – "I am getting up at the same time every day." or "We see us next week." Probably quite often. Students might very well make all of these mistakes in a matter of minutes. Correcting each of these mistakes in a way that doesn't interrupt the flow of your lesson or demotivate the learner is no easy task.

## When should we correct?

Each of your lessons will have different phases; a warm-up activity, teacher presentation, spoken and written practice elements, as well as freer practice (discussion, conversation, games and role play). Being sure of the aims of each phase of your lesson and differentiating between accuracy practice and fluency practice will help you know when and how to correct.

When the focus is on accuracy, in the (controlled) practice stages of a lesson, then consistent error correction is vital. Most teachers develop their own style sign language for showing students when and where they have slipped up without interrupting the proceedings too much.

When the focus is on fluency – in the warm-up and freer practice stages – then it's important not to interrupt students when they make errors, but rather help them when they get stuck or when there is a misunderstanding.

Listening to our students is just as important as talking to them. During fluency stages in a lesson, it's helpful to take notes on your learners' utterances – both flawed and perfect. Reserve time to give learners feedback on their language production, drawing attention to a few mistakes in language areas that you have already covered in class. Rather than always offering the correct version yourself, try eliciting the correction from the class.

## What should we correct?

Having a good knowledge of the curriculum of each language level according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages will help you identify which errors to focus on. In the Grammar overview, at the back of each *Let's Enjoy English* course book, you can find all the grammar topics covered in that particular book.

You can also find out which grammar topics and which vocabulary topics are covered at levels A1 to C2 here: [www.exam.english.com](http://www.exam.english.com). And to find out more about the CEFR "can-do" descriptors have a look here: [www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/the-cefr-descriptors](http://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/the-cefr-descriptors).

A good strategy for fossilized error correction is to focus on one error at a time, beginning with errors made in language taught early in the curriculum. For example, if the learner is still struggling to use *do* and *does* correctly (A1 curriculum), deal with that thoroughly and consistently before focussing on errors made when using the present perfect (A2 curriculum).

## How should we correct?

The first step towards correcting fossilized errors is to make the learner aware of the mistakes they make. It's probably not very helpful to talk to your learners about fossilization – it doesn't sound very positive and it's pretty difficult to say too! Introduce the idea of *favourite mistakes* and talk

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# STEP 1: About town

## 3a Quick revision: near, next to, opposite

1 Read the questions. What do the **blue** words mean? Write down the meanings.

- 1 Is there a supermarket **near** your home?
- 2 Where's **the nearest** post office?
- 3 Is there a railway station **near here**?
- 4 Is there a car park **next to** your favourite restaurant?
- 5 What is there **opposite** your house?

2 In pairs. Ask the questions and give true answers.

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to the class about how you will try to deal with these.

When you give feedback at the end of a communicative activity, write five of the best mistakes – or learning opportunities – on the board and encourage the learners to note down their own mistakes as well as the correct version. At the end of a successful course, even if there is

help gradually eradicate deep-seated errors. A learner won't necessarily feel the need to work hard to get rid of their favourite mistakes when what they say sounds correct to them and they don't get the feedback that they haven't been understood. Not only interrupting, but asking learners to write down the mistake as well as the correction will further increase motivation to improve their

verbs, etc. Correcting, but also practising these areas sufficiently is key to making progress.

Working with a review book is a good way to consolidate the tricky structures that are prone to negative transfer, while at the same time covering interesting topics and expanding learners' vocabularies.

In the *Let's Enjoy English* A1 and A2 Review course books, revision and consolidation are carefully integrated at all times. With a wealth of communicative activities, they provide plenty of opportunity for teachers to listen out for and correct those favourite mistakes.

*“You must learn from the mistakes of others. You can't possibly live long enough to make them all yourself.”*

*Sam Levenson, US author*

still a slip-up here and there, learners will not only be aware of their own favourite mistakes, but of those of their classmates too.

### Making real progress

We may feel hesitant to correct errors when we can understand perfectly what a speaker means. It doesn't always feel appropriate to interrupt someone when they're in full flow. However, by interrupting and asking for clarification, we give the learner a real reason to change the way they speak and this is what will

accuracy. Practising particularly tricky areas with oral drills will also help your learners internalize the trickiest structures. After all, practice makes perfect.

### Review

When we think about the mistakes learners make at B1 level, it is apparent that a lot of these errors are in language structures taught at A1 level; third-person s, forming questions with *do* or *does*, using the present simple and present progressive correctly, the past forms of irregular



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