MANAGING MISTAKES IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

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**Introduction**

The most demanding and difficult language skill to be mastered in language learning and teaching is speaking. The primary importance of teaching English is to reach communicative competence that can be defined as the ability to create grammatically correct, logically linked utterances taking into consideration particulate social context and adequate pronunciation. According to Canale and Swain (1980) communicative competence can be defined in terms of different sub competences:

* grammatical / linguistic (defined as ability to create grammatically correct utterances);
* sociolinguistic (defined as ability to produce sociolinguistically appropriate utterances);
* discourse(defined as ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances/texts);
* strategic (defined as ability to solve communication problems as they arise).

Nowadays, in teaching any foreign there is an evident emphasis on using language for purposes of practical communication considering accurate and fluent production (Thornbury, 2008, Littlewood, 2006, Harmer, 2009).

Apart from artificial languages such as Esperanto[[1]](#footnote-1), language is never a rationally designed, perfect and finished phenomenon. It is rather a spontaneous and dynamic stream of linguistic and extra linguistic means, often unpredictably influenced by many objective and subjective factors. The speaker has many options to choose from which can or cannot be appropriate in a foreign language context or situation. Some choices in language production can be acceptable in Standard English; others would be rejected as inappropriate in the given context.

The quality of any language production can be measured in terms of comprehensibility. In fact the quality even of the native language is very vague and considered as “something unnecessary” to many members of the community. In everyday communication, media, published materials one can spot a lot of examples of “wrong Slovak” that go against rules.

The aim of the article is to consider the place of mistakes[[2]](#footnote-2) or “wrong English” in speaking EFL[[3]](#footnote-3), how the teacher should handle learner´s mistakes in spoken English and react to them to retain learner´s motivation and willingness to speak in the lesson and later out of the classroom.

**1 Mistakes as evidence of learning**

In the process of learning anything a human being learns by making minor or major mistakes. It takes a long time until we become for example good drivers, teachers, or cooks. Our path to “perfection” is paved with lot of mistakes. Thus making them is inevitable also in the process of learning/acquiring English.

The quality of language production cannot be measured only by accuracy. Modern English usage is fairly liberal. In the Oxford Guide to English Usage one can read: *The emphasis is on the degree of acceptability in Standard English of a particular use, rather than on a dogmatic distinction of right and wrong* (1995, p.8). We have to admit there are several degrees of correctness. Obviously there are teachers who would always insist on grammatical correctness but nowadays grammar is not the most important aspect of teaching and learning English (Swan, 2008).On one hand if you make many mistakes of any kind one may be more difficult to be understood, and people may look down on you or not take you seriously. On the other hand hardly anybody communicates in a foreign language perfectly.

In the past mistakes were regarded as evidence of insufficient learning and reasons to punish learners. Nowadays due to trends in humanistic pedagogy and psychology, mistakes are seen as positive progress in language learning. It is a generally accepted idea that any language can be mastered through using it in communication. As Bowen points out, mistakes are visible evidence of the invisible process of learning (Bowen – Marks, 1994). Errors can show the teacher that a learner is trying out ideas, experimenting with language and taking risk. Analyzing what kind of errors the learner makes, the teacher can prepare remedial language work.

Apparently error correction is a very familiar feature in most of our classrooms. In the classroom situation it is the English teacher who is often in a dilemma; correct or not to correct wrong English.

As many mistakes in communication can result in misunderstanding and further problems, the teacher in the role of assessor has to react to learner´s mistakes. What I want to stress is the word *react* and not *correct* as correction is only one of several options the teacher can choose from.

The aim of reacting to errors is not giving a learner the correct answer on the plate. It is rather help them to make their own correction and raise their awareness about English.

Scrivener (1994) summarizes aims when correcting as follows:

* building confidence;
* raising awareness;
* acknowledging achievement and progress;
* helping learners to become more accurate in using English. (Scrivener, 1994, p.109).

**2 Mistakes and learner responsibility**

The process of developing learners’ autonomy is closely related to a view that learners need to be more responsible for recognising and correcting their own mistakes. The question is whether teachers are ready to give responsibility and learners are ready to take it. In our schools learners like to receive feedback in different ways for different reasons. What the teacher has to consider is the age and level of the learner, the aim of the lesson or/and task, possible learner´s embarrassment and the danger of losing face. As Vajdičková (2012) points out task based language teaching is a natural extension of communicative language learning which means than the reaction to mistakes should be similar to one in real communication.

Considering these factors the teacher can intuitively find out when is the “right moment” and what is the “right technique” for a concrete learner.

Brown (1998, p. 265) suggests error treatment options that can provide teachers with some guidelines how to approach learner´s mistakes in the lesson:

Basic options:

1. To treat or to ignore a mistake
2. To treat immediately or to delay
3. To transfer treatment e.g. to other learners or not
4. To transfer to another learner/learners/a whole class
5. To return, or not, to original error maker after treatment
6. To permit other learners to initiate treatment
7. To test for the efficacy of the treatment.

Possible features:

1. Fact of error indicated
2. Location indicated
3. Opportunity for new attempt given
4. Model provided
5. Error type indicated
6. Remedy indicated
7. Improvement indicated
8. Praise indicated.

All of the basic options and features within each option are possible modes of error management in the lesson and some of them can contribute to developing learner´s responsibility for own progress and autonomy. The teacher needs to develop the intuition for deciding which option or combination of options is appropriate for the given situation.

**Conclusion**

To conclude it is useful to stress again, that the problem with mistakes management does not lie in the fact that learners are corrected, but rather in the way they are corrected. Some learners are apparently able to deal with this in a very rational manner and teacher´s correction leads them to responsibility, others may become disappointed and upset.

Every teacher is to value learners, prize any attempts to communicate and express oneself, and then provide optimal feedback.

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Resumé

Cieľom príspevku je poukázať na význam chyby a možností reakcie na chyby v ústnom prejave žiakov. V článku považujeme chybu za pozitívny signál pre učiteľa aj pre žiaka o zvyšovaní jeho komunikačnej kompetencie. Zdôrazňujeme nutnosť individuálneho prístupu a rôznorodých korekčných techník a reakcií učiteľa na chyby žiaka v ústnej produkcii.

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1. Esperanto is a neutral international language created by L L Zamenhof in the end of the 19th century. After more than a century since its inception, Esperanto is now spoken by hundreds of thousands - in fact, probably millions - of people all over the world. Today the objective of Esperanto is the same as always: to become the one foreign language everybody studies and learns. While no foreign language is easy to master, Esperanto was intentionally designed to be as easy to learn as possible. Its grammar is concise and highly regular, and its basic vocabulary consists of two thousand words or so - tens of thousands of words are formed with regular endings and other similar devices. You should be able to put Esperanto in use several times faster than any national language.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to Bartram and Walton we distinguish:

   error – learners experiment with language without previous knowledge about e.g. a rule

   mistake- learners are able to correct themselves

   slip-learners produce wrong language due to stress, lack of concentration etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. EFL – English as a Foreign Language [↑](#footnote-ref-3)