

Effective correction of emergent language: why, when, what and how?

Training materials for language teachers

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What is emergent language?

Emergent language has been suggested to differ from other language being used in that it may be viewed as “language becoming prominent”, “marked” for lack of control or overcompensation, and “language which rises above the profile of the learner’s general language use. It is language sticking its head above the trenches – it is language use above and beyond the call of duty” (Gaughn, 2012)

OR IN OTHER WORDS

Students trying to say something they don’t know how to say or haven’t mastered yet

Overview

1. Why correct students' emergent language?
2. When? Which part of the lesson?
3. What? Do I correct everything?
4. How? Which methods work best?

Why should
we correct
students'
emergent
language?

Easy.

1. Because they need us to
2. Because they want us to

Next question...

Hang on...why don't they always
respond positively to it then?

If students don't respond positively,
it's because we aren't doing it right.

What is “right”?

Doing it “right” means doing it effectively.

Ineffective correction is a waste of their time...

So what constitutes effective correction?

RIGHT TIME (When?)

RIGHT CONTENT (What?)

RIGHT METHOD (How?)

When to correct emergent language

Three options:

➤ **On-the-spot correction**

Correct students while they are speaking. Decide whether to note down to board and drill later

➤ **Stop and teach:** board and drill immediately (whatever the class stage)

Stop the class and make an issue of it. Board and drill whole class

➤ **Language feedback slot:** note down errors, board and drill

Turn their errors into a classroom activity focused on their use of English. Board and drill whole class

On-the- spot correction

“Not now!”... interruptions break flow and concentration

SO LIMIT THIS TYPE OF CORRECTION TO:

Times when students can respond to it and continue speaking

i.e.

- higher levels
- stronger students (who will repeat the correct version and continue)
- simple corrections

NOTE: correction is not the same as feeding vocabulary when they're stuck, although this should also be written down for the feedback slot

Stop and teach

This is a brief interruption to deal with an error. Board it, drill it to whole class, carry on.

It is often a revision of something they already know, but in doing this you are training students to attend equally to CONTENT i.e. WHAT they are saying and FORM i.e. HOW they are saying it or THE LANGUAGE they're using to say it.

One of the main problems with freer speaking activities is that students focus mainly on CONTENT, so by emphasizing correct FORM during the activity you are sending a clear message to students to do the same.

Language feedback slot

This is a language activity that should be awarded equal if not more importance than textbook activities.

Why?

Because correcting students' errors is the most relevant language work you can do with them.

It needs its own time slot in the lesson plan.

There may be more than one in a single lesson.

Language feedback slot

Requires:

- Unintrusive and careful monitoring
(see [this article](#) I wrote for the British Council website)
- Selective listening skills
- Means of taking notes (iPad or similar / pen and paper)
- Organization
- Means of presenting notes to class (screen / board and different coloured board pens)
- Time: 10-15 minutes for each speaking activity

What to correct

Everything? **No**. Be selective according to these criteria:

➤ Level of class

Is the corrected language too high for this level? Waste of time. Don't start teaching 3rd conditionals to A2 – do some learner training instead “Simplify here”

➤ Usefulness of language

Is it language they will use again?

➤ Difficulty of language

Save it for a full-blown practice activity next class if it needs more than just correction
e.g. tenses / structures

How to correct

Common techniques:

1. Reformulate student's utterance
2. Prompt self-correction
3. Note down errors, board and drill

Which are **effective** and when?

1. As a correction technique, pretty much **never**, unless you train your students to **take action** when you reformulate
2. With **simple** and **repetitive** errors during speaking
3. Things students **do not know** / **need to revise and practise**

How to correct: noting down errors

Write down the whole sentence, or anything that will help you remember the problem when you come to correct it

Common teacher objection:

“But I won’t be listening while I’m noting down errors, I’ll miss any other errors the students make”

- It doesn’t matter, correcting 70% of students’ emergent language effectively is better than correcting 100% ineffectively because you didn’t take full note of the problem

How to correct: noting down errors

Divide errors into at least **three categories**. You can divide these into subsections (e.g. Pronunciation: Word stress) when boarding them later:

- Pronunciation

e.g. own /**aun**/

- Vocabulary

e.g. a speech (by a lecturer)

- Grammar

e.g. the way we are used to do things

How to correct: dealing with errors

...and do some language teaching!

Pronunciation: sound/spelling
e.g. “own” same sound as low,
know, etc. BUT not how

Pronouncing ‘ow’

/aʊ/

/əʊ/

how

low

now

show

brown

know

cow

own

town

owe

etc.

etc.

How to correct: extrapolating from errors

Pronunciation: connected speech

“your own”

Boardwork

your own /ju-rəun/

vs.

you're on /ju-ron/ (a roll)

vs.

you're out /ju-raut/ (of time)

How to correct: extrapolating from errors

Vocabulary

a speech

Boardwork

a speech (politicians)

a talk (lecturers at a conference)

Which verbs **collocate** with a speech / a talk?

Boardwork

we **give/do** a talk NOT ~~make a talk~~

BUT

we **make** a speech

How to correct: extrapolating from errors

Grammar

“the way we are used to do things”

Boardwork

the way we are used to do things > the way we are used to doing things

To be used to + ___ing = to be accustomed to

S: Why?

T: Because the second “to” in “to be used to” is a preposition, unlike the past habit structure “subject + used to”, where it is part of the infinitive.

Optional teaching: contrast the above with examples

e.g.

I am used to getting up early (I am accustomed to it)

vs

I used to get up early (past habit, but not anymore)

Further examples of **extrapolating** from students' errors

Pronunciation

“I deleted it” /**di-li:t it**/ -> __ed endings

Mention __ed endings **rule** and drill examples:

e.g. wanted /**id**/ BUT watched /**t**/ etc.

But also **connected speech** with following pronoun here:

I deleted it /**di-li:-ti-dit**/

She calculated it /**kal-kju:-lei-ti-dit**/ etc.

“AI summarizes the text for you” /**sʌm-ə-raiz**/
> 3rd person and plural endings

Mention **rule** regarding when extra syllable is pronounced /**əz**/ or /**iz**/ and drill examples:

e.g. emphasizes, realizes, houses, offices, etc.

How to correct

Is that it? **No!**

That's not the whole story. To make any
language correction effective...

**LEARNERS MUST REPEAT THE
CORRECTED VERSION...**

SEVERAL TIMES

**UNTIL THEY AT LEAST APPROXIMATE
THE CORRECT FORM**

“OK, got it” is not enough

TASK:
Further
examples of
extrapolating
from students'
errors

How could you extrapolate from these errors?

Pronunciation:

- image /i-ma:ʒ/
- certificate /sə-ti-fi-keit/
- component i.e. word stress

Vocabulary:

- “after secondary comes superior education”
- “to show up their natural abilities”

Grammar:

- “being teached at home”

Suggested answers

Pronunciation:

“image” pronounced /**i**-ma:ʒ/

weak ____age endings are pronounced
/b**idʒ**/

e.g. image /**i**-mi**dʒ**/

damage /**da**-mi**dʒ**/

mortgage /**mɔ:**-gi**dʒ**/ etc.

What about the plural? /**əz**/

images /**i**-mi-**dʒəz**/

damages /**da**-mi-**dʒəz**/

mortgages /**mɔ:**-gi-**dʒəz**/ etc.

Listen and repeat all examples

Suggested answers

Pronunciation:

“certificate” pronounced /sə-ti-fi-keit/

____ate endings are pronounced /ət/ with nouns
and adjectives

e.g. nouns: the First Certificate /sə-ti-fi-kət/
a bracelet /breɪs-lət/
a graduate /grɑ-dju:-(w)ət/ etc.

adjectives: accurate /a-kju:-rət/
deliberate /di-li-bə-rət/
separate /se-pə-rət/ etc.

But verbs are pronounced /eit/

e.g: to calculate /kal-kju:-leɪt/
to separate /se-pə-reɪt/
to graduate /grɑ-dju:-(w)eɪt/ etc.

Listen and repeat all examples

Suggested answers

Pronunciation:

“component” pronounced /kom-po-nent/

Word stress: three-syllable nouns are commonly pronounced with second syllable stress

e.g. component /kəm-pəu-nent/

enjoyment /en-dʒoi-ment/

decision /di-si-ʒən/

Listen and repeat all examples

Suggested answers

Vocabulary:

“after secondary comes superior education”

Give correct version: “higher education comes
after secondary education”

Follow up: When do we use the adjective
“superior” in English?

Common examples:

This new model offers superior performance

He only helps us because it makes him feel
superior

Listen and repeat all examples

Suggested answers

Vocabulary:

“to show up their natural abilities”

Give correct version: “to show off their natural abilities”

Follow up: It can also be used intransitively e.g.
“He’s just showing off”

Connotation: is it positive or negative? Can be either, depending on context.

Other common examples of the verb “show off”:

He was **showing off his new car** to his friends
She started **showing off her dance moves** at the club

What about common examples of “show up”?

He **hasn't shown up to work** today
They never **show up on time**

Listen and repeat all examples

Suggested answers

Grammar:

“being teached at home”

Give correct version: “being taught at home”

Follow up: commonly mistaken irregular verbs

Tickets have **got** so expensive (“get” in British English)

Tickets have **gotten** so expensive (“get” in US English)

They’ve **chosen** that one (“choose”)

What language was it **written** in? (“write”)

Listen and repeat all examples

Practice: decide **when** and **how** to correct the following:

1. C1 clarification stage. Student asks “Why don’t you situate the verb in a different place?”
2. A2 freer speaking activity. Student says “My sister she no like these situations”
3. B2 reading activity. Student reading aloud “He doesn’t live in isolation” /hi: dozən laiv in i:səuleishən/”
4. B1 whole class feedback. Student says “When you want clean you, is important”

Suggested answers

EX 1. C1 clarification stage.

Student asks: “Why don’t you situate the verb in a different place?”

WHEN TO CORRECT?

Stop class and teach

HOW TO CORRECT?

Give correct version: “Why doesn’t the verb go in a different place?”

Follow up - teach vocabulary:

Teach new structure: “Where does (something) go?” meaning
“What is its natural position?”

When do we use the verb “situate”? Meaning is similar to “locate”.

Common examples:

They decided to situate the new office building near the airport.

The home is situated on a hill looking out over the ocean.

Listen and repeat all examples

Suggested answers

Ex. 2. A2 freer speaking activity.

Student says “My sister she no like these situations”

WHEN TO CORRECT?

Note down for Feedback slot after speaking activity

HOW TO CORRECT?

Give correct version: “My sister doesn’t like these situations”

Follow up - teach grammar:

1. Avoid double subject

“My sister, she likes...” > “My sister likes...”

Elicit and/or feed further relevant personalised examples from learners
e.g. “My brother lives in Mexico”

2. Negation 3rd person present simple
“My sister doesn’t like”

Elicit and/or feed further relevant personalised examples from learners
e.g. “My friend doesn’t eat meat”

Listen and repeat all examples

Suggested answers

Ex. 3. B2 reading activity. Student reading aloud
“He doesn’t live in isolation” /hi: ɔ-zən laiv in i:-səu-leɪ-ʃən /”

WHEN TO CORRECT?

Stop class and teach (after student finishes reading)

HOW TO CORRECT?

Give correct version: “He doesn’t live in isolation” /hi: ɔ-zən liv in ai-sə-leɪ-ʃən/”

Follow up - teach pronunciation:

1. /liv/ vs /laiv/

/liv/ verb to live, as learners already know

/laiv/ adjective meaning “happening now”
e.g. it’s a live show; she’s singing live

Other common words spelt _ive and pronounced /aiv/:
five; dive

2. isolation /ai-sə-leɪ-ʃən/”

Other common words beginning with “i” and pronounced /ai/:
idea; identity; identify; island; irony; etc.

Listen and repeat all examples

Suggested answers

Ex. 4. B1 whole class feedback. “This is important when you want clean you”

WHEN TO CORRECT?

Stop class and teach (after student has finished speaking) OR note down for Feedback slot

HOW TO CORRECT?

Respond to content first: “Oh, that’s a good point Maria”

Give correct version “When you want to clean yourself”

Follow up - teach vocabulary and grammar

Vocabulary: to clean yourself

Form:

clean myself, yourself, herself, himself, ourselves, themselves

Other common examples:

to enjoy yourself; to express yourself

Grammar: want + to infinitive

Elicit and/or feed further relevant personalised examples from learners

e.g. “I don’t want to work this weekend”

Listen and repeat all examples

Typical problems correcting I

1) Correcting what they already know

Solutions:

- extrapolate to make it more challenging
- emphasize the importance of accurate production

2) Correcting weaker students in front of group

Solutions:

- don't do it
- use their and others' errors for a feedback slot

3) "It's OK, I understand you"

Solutions:

- acceptable at lower levels to encourage trial and error, but less acceptable the higher the level
- insist on increasing need for accuracy in all areas at higher levels

Typical problems correcting II

4) Allowing things to go misunderstood... “it doesn’t matter”

Solutions:

- use L1 to clarify meaning if possible
- take time to discuss meaning with students “What do you mean exactly?”, “Are you saying this or this?”
- use online resources in class: bilingual dictionaries, AI tools

5) Wrong correction e.g. literal translation by teacher (usually due to time pressure)

Solutions:

- take time to discuss meaning with students “What do you mean exactly?”, “Are you saying this or this?”
- use online resources in class: bilingual dictionaries, AI tools

SOME FINAL TIPS

- **Drill corrections and have students read them aloud**, not just words or phrases, but **whole sentences**. This is a holistic exercise (if done correctly) and helps all areas: pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar
- Do **regular reviews**
- **Make accuracy important** in use of English, but **don't overcorrect**. Look at the students' reaction to gauge this. Negotiate with them
- Share the idea that they need at least **seven contacts** to learn something new and be able to produce it
- Use **their English** to gradually improve their English!

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