

## Students' errors in English and what to do about them

### (Part Two)

In Part One of this discussion dealing with student errors in English it was noted that parents' and teachers' are probably more concerned about productive language errors (speaking and writing), particularly spoken errors, than to receptive errors (incomplete comprehension in listening or reading). The next question – the million dollar one – is how (and when) does a teacher best correct an error in speech? This question introduces yet another question: Are we looking for **fluency** or **accuracy** in students' speech at the time the error occurs? Learning bilingually impacts on this question differently from learning English in a specific English language (ESL/TESOL) class.

In bilingual schooling, even after the early years immersion phase, when students may be spending 80% of their class time in English, has been passed and the English component may have reduced to, say, 50%, students are still "flooded" with English across the curriculum. They are

still learning core curriculum content through English in addition to Thai (at least in two-way bilingual schools), so it is not practicable for native-speaker teachers to correct every spoken error they hear, particularly where the student is being asked to provide information, or express a view, or relate an experience in English that deals with the *content* that is being taught. In these cases, *fluency* – the ability to communicate in a way that is easily understood – is being called for rather than accuracy.

In an English-language (ESL/TESOL) class, however, where a particular linguistic form or usage is being taught and practiced, students are required to demonstrate that they have understood and can apply that form or usage accurately. Where that is the case, *accuracy* in addition to fluency is required. If students cannot demonstrate that they have acquired the form or usage accurately, the teacher has to correct the errors by pointing them out and, if necessary, re-teaching the form or usage. To not do so would be to "reinforce the error", ie to give students the understanding that the incorrect form is all right, in which case students will repeat the error later.

Error correction is not confined to the TESOL classroom, however, nor is it restricted to errors in accuracy. In a language-through-content class, such as Science, for example, students may demonstrate that they lack the English language skill to communicate necessary information clearly (for example, to describe a cause and effect process they have observed and practiced). The teacher will not want to interrupt the students' explanation for two reasons: (1) The student is trying to make meaning through English and needs to be encouraged, not discouraged. (2) The process of struggling to make meaning, especially when given some cues by the teacher, assists the student to develop strategies to this purpose; finding words to replace words he/she doesn't know; "repairing" (rephrasing) words or sentences that he/she realizes were not right, etc. However, if a number of students indicate that they are having the same communicative difficulty, the teacher will then need to teach the language necessary for that communicative purpose. In this sense, a native or near-native speaker in a bilingual school is a teacher of English in addition to whatever subject he or she is teaching.

With regard to errors that really do need to be corrected as soon as the student has completed his/her attempted communication, the suggestion is often made to simply rephrase the statement in its correct form. Hence, if a student says "We *seen* a good movie last night", the teacher has to do something about it. To let the error pass would be to approve it, but it is an error that clearly needs to be corrected, as it is a misuse of tense that would be regarded as a sub-standard and socially unacceptable usage in standard English contexts. If the teacher simply rephrases the statement with the correct form ("oh, you *saw* a good movie"), the student may not realize that the error is being corrected. The student may think the teacher is merely affirming his or her report. This is more likely to be the case with younger students, however. Older students, especially adults, may be more aware of what the teacher is trying to do. Younger students (children and perhaps adolescents) need explicit correction. This requires the teacher to (1) alert the child to the error; (2) provide the correct form; and (3) ask the student to produce the form correctly. Where the error is both significant and common among students, it needs to be re-taught again at times.

There is a fear that error correction will interrupt the flow of communication and will discourage students from communicating or volunteering to speak. This is a legitimate fear, especially with sensitive students and where students are really trying hard to get their message across. However, errors are obstacles in the path of language development and must be cleared away. Who is better to help in this clearance than the native English-speaking teacher? Nevertheless, in an English-flooded learning environment such as a bilingual school, it is sometimes better not to clear away every piece of rubbish, unnecessarily holding up progress thereby, but those obstacles that prevent the learners from moving forward in the right direction. It also needs to be recognized that some errors are “good errors” – they indicate some progress in development from a lower to a higher stage, but not yet perfect competence in the language. Perhaps the purpose and value of “good errors” (“interlanguage”) can be taken up in the next article in our series on bilingual education and English learning.