

## When the right answer is OK but the wrong answer is better

In an earlier Metro Life article about student errors, we said that:

*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.*

What this means is that, as we all know from experience, we can only perfect a skill or competence by trying to do more than we may be capable of at the time. Striving for achievement takes three forms:

- Repeating what we know and can do well
- Practising what we know and can do with difficulty
- Attempting what we may not yet be able to do, but would like to try.

If we think of an athlete preparing for an important race, he will

1. Run over the distance repeatedly at a comfortable speed
2. Run fewer times over the distance at close to or at maximum speed
3. Occasionally attempt a time trial to see if he can produce a best time.

No. 1 is easy. The athlete does it just to maintain fitness. No. 2 is more difficult, but it keeps the runner sharp. No. 3 is very difficult if the athlete has been in peak form for a while. A "PB" (personal best) may require the excitement and extra competition of a big race.

If the athlete simply stayed at level 1 all the time, he would never reach maximum performance, would fail in all but lower level competitions and would never know what his maximum potential could be. To stay at this level would be a shameful waste of ability and opportunity.

If the athlete stays at level 2, he is still within his "comfort zone". This will enable regular performances at that level, but at no higher.

Only if the athlete is prepared to extend himself, to try for something he has not yet attained, will he eventually succeed. The “PB” he attains today with so much effort will become easy tomorrow. His “comfort zone” will have been raised to a higher level.

Unlike a runner, however, who can measure her performance by use of a stopwatch alone, a language learner has to test her ability in public with other speakers of the target language. Only by making the effort to *produce language that she has not produced before* will that effort be successful. When it is, what was once too difficult will become easy.

Only by taking risks in language learning and practice will the language learner move up to the next stage. In making the attempt the learner may well make a mistake, but which is better – to make a mistake that is close to the correct form being attempted, or to avoid mistakes by using only the language within one’s comfort zone?

The highly respected Scottish language scholar, Pit Corder, noted in 1967 that, when learners produce “correct”

sentences, they may simply be repeating something they have already heard; however, when they produce sentences that are “incorrect”, but not far from the correct form, this may indicate how well they understand the rules and patterns of the language. So, a student who simply memorizes the correct answer may have progressed less in understanding the language than one whose answer is incorrect, but who has applied a growing understanding of how the language works.

Language is not just about imitation and memorization. These have a role, but successful learning of a new language depends on the learner’s ability to “see into” the patterns and processes, the rules and logic of the language. Much of this “insight” takes place unconsciously, through a language acquisition capacity with which we are all born. Not all language has to be taught, nor even heard. The brain has the capacity within itself to produce correct language, and this potential becomes actual once the speaker has had a chance to attempt it in communication.

Another distinguished scholar, the American, Stephen Krashen, taught in the 1980s that students will learn language well if they are immersed in it and if it is at one level above their competence. Krashen called this  $I + 1$  (where  $I$  stands for input, the language that students can cope with at present). Students should then, after a while, be called upon to produce language just above their current competence level. This means, of course, that they will not always produce correct language, even if they have a growing understanding of how the language works.

While they are moving from  $I$  to  $I + 1$ , they are moving through an important stage called "interlanguage". This stage is marked by the application of correct language rules and patterns, but applied *incorrectly*. For example, having grasped the pattern of comparatives and superlatives (good, better, best; nice, nicer, nicest; clean, cleaner, cleanest etc.), a student may produce the utterance: *She is bad, he is worser, but I am the worst*. This sentence is perfectly clear, but it is incorrect, because the comparative form of bad is *worse*, not *worser*. It does not follow the common pattern for comparatives. The error is easily corrected and the sentence is perfectly clear.

Only one element now needs to be remembered to make the sentence perfect. Had she produced the correct utterance simply from memory, without understanding how, in fact, comparatives are formed, she would be formally correct, but less advanced in knowledge of how the language works.

Errors produced in the stage of interlanguage, where they are the result of inappropriately applying a correct rule, must be corrected so that the interlanguage is not fossilized. However, students should be told that the error is a "good one" (because it shows progress, though not yet full attainment in understanding) and they must be encouraged to keep taking risks and to keep on extending themselves so that they will achieve success beyond their current comfort zone.