THE PRACTICE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED

Jeremy Harmer

7 Mistakes and feedback

Feedback encompasses not only correcting students, but also offering them an assessment of how well they have done, whether during a drill or after a longer language production exercise. The way we assess and correct students will depend not only upon the kind of mistakes being made (and the reasons for them), but also on the type of activity the students are taking part in.

A Students make mistakes

One of the things that puzzles many teachers is why students go on making the same mistakes even when such mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them. Yet not all mistakes are the same; sometimes they seem to be deeply ingrained, yet at other times students correct themselves with apparent ease.

In his book on mistakes and correction Julian Edge suggests that we can divide mistakes into three broad categories: 'slips' (that is mistakes which students can correct themselves once the mistake has been pointed out to them), 'errors' (mistakes which they cannot correct themselves – and which therefore need explanation), and 'attempts' (that is when a student tries to say something but does not yet know the correct way of saying it) (Edge 1989: Chapter 2). Of these, it is the category of errors that most concerns teachers, though the students' attempts will tell us a lot about their current knowledge – and may well provide chances for opportunistic teaching (see Chapter 11, A2).

It is now widely accepted that there are two distinct causes for the errors which most if not all students make at various stages:

- **L1 interference:** students who learn English as a second language already have a deep knowledge of at least one other language, and where L1 and English come into contact with each other there are often confusions which provoke errors in a learner's use of English. This can be at the level of sounds: Arabic, for example, does not have a phonemic distinction between /f/ and /v/, and Arabic speakers may well say *ferry* when they mean *very*. It can be at the level of grammar where a student's first language has a subtly different system: French students often have trouble with the present perfect because there is a similar form in French but the same time concept is expressed slightly differently; Japanese students have problems with article usage because Japanese does not use the same system of reference, and so on. It may, finally, be at the level of word usage where similar sounding words have slightly different meanings:

librería in Spanish means 'bookshop', not 'library', *embarazada* means 'pregnant', not 'embarrassed' (such so-called 'false friends' are common between Romance languages).

- **Developmental errors:** for a long time now researchers in child language development have been aware of the phenomenon of 'over-generalisation'. This is best described as a situation where a child who starts by saying *Daddy went, They came*, etc. perfectly correctly suddenly starts saying **Daddy goed* and **They comed*. What seems to be happening is that the child starts to 'over-generalise' a new rule that has been (subconsciously) learnt, and as a result even makes mistakes with things that he or she knew before. Later, however, it all gets sorted out, as the child begins to have a more sophisticated understanding, and he or she goes back to saying *went* and *came* whilst, at the same time, handling regular past tense endings.

  Foreign language students make the same kind of 'developmental' errors as well. This accounts for mistakes like **She is more nicer than him* where the acquisition of *more* for comparatives is over-generalised and then mixed up with the rule that the student has learnt – that comparative adjectives are formed of an adjective + *-er*. Errors of this kind are part of a natural acquisition process. When second language learners make errors, they are demonstrating part of the natural process of language learning.

Errors are part of the students' **interlanguage**, that is the version of the language which a learner has at any one stage of development, and which is continually reshaped as he or she aims towards full mastery. When responding to errors teachers should be seen as providing feedback, helping that reshaping process rather than telling students off because they are wrong.

B Assessing student performance

Assessment of student performance can come from the teacher or from the students themselves.

B1 Teachers assessing students

Assessment of performance can be explicit when we say *That was really good*, or implicit when, during a language drill for example, we pass on to the next student without making any comment or correction (there is always the danger, however, that the student may misconstrue our silence as something else).

Because the assessment we give is either largely positive or somewhat negative students are likely to receive it in terms of praise or criticism. Indeed, one of our roles is to encourage students by praising them for work that is well done, just as it is one of our duties to say when things have not been successful (see Chapter 4, B3). Yet the value of this praise and blame is not quite as clear-cut as such a bald statement might imply.

While it is true that students respond well to praise, over-complimenting them on their work – particularly where their own self-evaluation tells them they have

not done well – is likely to prove counter-productive. Williams and Burden (1997: 134–136) show that to be effective, praise has to be combined, in the students' eyes, with the teacher's genuine interest in their work. They report on research (Caffyn 1984) in which secondary students reported their need to understand the reasons for the teacher's approval or disapproval. Such students were likely to respond better to private assessment which leads to successful future action than to public recognition. Punishment was seen as completely counter-productive.

What this suggests is that assessment has to be handled with subtlety. Indiscriminate praise or blame will have little positive effect – indeed it will be negatively received – but measured approval and disapproval which demonstrates a teacher's interest in and attention to a student's work may well result in continuing or even increased motivation (see Chapter 3C).

It is sometimes tempting to concentrate all our feedback on the language which students use such as incorrect verb tenses, pronunciation, or spelling for example, and to ignore the content of what they are saying or writing. Yet especially when we involve them in language production activities (see Chapters 17–19) this is a mistake. Whenever we ask students to give opinions or write creatively, whenever we set up a role-play or involve them in putting together a school newspaper, or in the writing of a report, what they choose to say is just as valuable as they how they choose to say it.

Apart from tests and exams (which we will consider in Chapter 23) there are a number of ways in which we can assess our students' work:

- **Comments:** commenting on student performance happens at various stages both in and outside the class. Thus we may say *good*, or nod approvingly, and these comments (or actions) are a clear sign of a positive assessment. When we wish to give a negative assessment we might do so by indicating that something has gone wrong (see C2 below), or by saying things such as *That's not quite right* or *Your invitation language was a bit mixed up.* When we make comments about our students' written work we can write speaking-like comments at the end of a piece of writing such as *You've written a very interesting composition*, or *Paragraph 2 is confusing because the sequence of events is not clear.* We can write our comments in note form in the margins, or use comment symbols (see D1 below).

- **Marks and grades:** when students are graded on their work they are always keen to know what grades they have achieved. Awarding a mark of 9/10 for a piece of writing or giving a B+ assessment for a speaking activity are clear indicators that students have done well.

  When students get good grades their motivation is often positively affected – provided that the level of challenge for the task was appropriate. Bad grades can be extremely disheartening. Nor is grading always easy and clear cut. If we want to give grades, therefore, we need to decide on what basis we are going to do this and be able to describe this to the students (see Chapter 23, C2 on marking tests).

  When we grade a homework exercise (or a test item) which depends on multiple choice, sentence fill-ins, or other controlled exercise types, it will be

relatively easy for students to understand how and why they achieved the marks or grades which we have given them. The same is less obviously true with more creative activities where we ask students to produce spoken or written language to perform a task. In such cases our awarding of grades will necessarily be somewhat more subjective. It is possible that despite this our students will have enough confidence in us to accept our judgement, especially where it coincides with their own assessment of their work. But where this is not the case – or where they compare their mark or grade with other students and do not agree with what they find – it will be helpful if we can demonstrate clear criteria for the grading we have given, either offering some kind of marking scale (see Chapter 23, C2), or some other written or spoken explanation of the basis on which we will make our judgement.

Awarding letter grades is potentially awkward if people misunderstand what letters mean. In some cultures success is only achieved if the grade is 'A', whereas for people in other education systems a 'B' indicates a good result. If, therefore, we wish to rely on grades like this our students need to be absolutely clear about what such grades mean – especially if we wish to add plus and minus signs to (e.g. C++ or A−).

Though grades are popular with students and teachers, some practitioners prefer not to award them, because they find the difference between an A and a B difficult to quantify, or because they cannot see the dividing line between a 'pass' and a 'distinction' clearly. Such teachers prefer to rely on the kind of comments mentioned above.

If we do use marks and grades, however, we can give them after an oral activity, for a piece of homework, or at the end of a period of time (a week or a semester).

- **Reports:** at the end of a term or year some teachers write reports on their students' performance either for the student, the school, or the parents of that student. Such reports should give a clear indication of how well the student has done in the recent past and a reasonable assessment of their future prospects.

  It is important when writing reports to achieve a judicious balance between positive and negative feedback, where this is possible. Like all feedback students have a right (and a desire) to know not only what their weaknesses may be, but also what strengths they have been able to demonstrate.

Reports of this kind may lead to future improvement and progress. The chances for this is greatly increased if they are taken together with the students' own assessment of their performance.

B2 Students assessing themselves

Although, as teachers, we are ideally placed to provide accurate assessments of student performance, students can also be extremely effective at monitoring and judging their own language production. They frequently have a very clear idea of how well they are doing or have done, and if we help them to develop this awareness, we may greatly enhance learning.

Student self-assessment is bound up with the whole matter of learner autonomy since if we can encourage them to reflect upon their own learning through learner training (Chapter 24, A1) or when on their own away from any classroom (see Chapter 24, A3), we are equipping them with a powerful tool for future development.

Involving students in assessment of themselves and their peers occurs when we ask a class *Do you think that's right?* after writing something we heard someone say up on the board, or asking the class the same question when one of their number gives a response. We can also ask them at the end of an activity how well they think they have got on – or tell them to add a written comment to a piece of written work they have completed, giving their own assessment of that work. We might ask them to give themselves marks or a grade and then see how this tallies with our own.

Self-assessment can be made more formal in a number of ways. Students can be given material to guide them in making their own judgements, as in the following example from a coursebook review unit for intermediate students:

B

Checklist

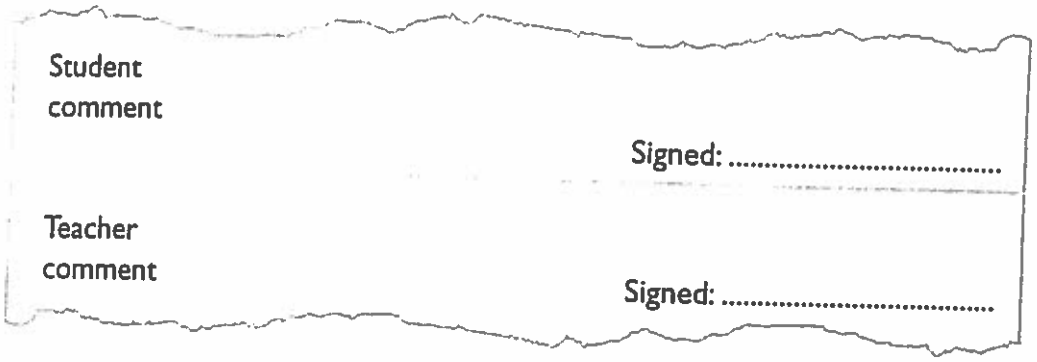
Use this checklist to record how you feel about your progress. Tick if you are satisfied with your progress. Put a cross if you are not satisfied.

I can	Yes/no	I know	Yes/no
deal with misunderstandings		how to get my meaning across in a conversation	
use questions tags correctly		some American colloquial expressions	
express my opinions		how to listen actively	
take part in meetings		more about effective communication	
agree and disagree politely		how to interrupt politely in meetings	
give compliments		more about using connectors and conjunctions	
use prepositions of time		some different ways of learning vocabulary	
recognise and pronounce weak forms of prepositions		more about my learning preferences	
use the simple present passive		how well I'm doing	

From *Activate your English Intermediate* by B Sinclair and P Prowse (Cambridge University Press)

A final way of formalising an assessment dialogue between teacher and student is through a 'record of achievement' (ROA). Here students are asked to write their own assessment of their successes and difficulties and say how they think they can proceed. The teacher then adds their own assessment of the students' progress (including grades), and replies to the points the student has made.

A typical ROA form might look like this:



Such ROAs, unlike the more informal journal and letter writing which students and teachers can engage in (see Chapter 24, A1), force both parties to think carefully about strengths and weaknesses and can help them decide on future courses of action. They are especially revealing for other people who might be interested in a student's progress, such as parents.

Where students are involved in their own assessment there is a good chance that their understanding of the feedback which their teacher gives them will be greatly enhanced as their own awareness of the learning process increases.

C Feedback during oral work

Though feedback – both assessment and correction – can be very helpful during oral work teachers should not deal with all oral production in the same way. Decisions about how to react to performance will depend upon the stage of the lesson, the activity, the type of mistake made, and the particular student who is making that mistake.

C1 Accuracy and fluency

A distinction is often made between accuracy and fluency. We need to decide whether a particular activity in the classroom is designed to expect the students' complete accuracy – as in the study of a piece of grammar, a pronunciation exercise, or some vocabulary work for example – or whether we are asking the students to use the language as fluently as possible. We need to make a clear difference between 'non-communicative' and 'communicative' activities (see Chapter 6, A4); whereas the former are generally intended to ensure correctness, the latter are designed to improve language fluency.

Most students want and expect us to give them feedback on their performance. For example, in one celebrated correspondence a non-native speaker teacher was upset when, on a teacher training course in Great Britain, her English trainers refused to correct any of her English because they thought it was inappropriate in a

training situation. 'We find that there is practically no correcting at all,' the teacher wrote, 'and this comes to us as a big disappointment' (Lavezzo and Dunford 1993: 62). Her trainers were not guilty of neglect, however. There was a principle at stake: 'The immediate and constant correction of all errors is not necessarily an effective way of helping course participants improve their English', the trainer replied on the same page of the journal.

This exchange of views exemplifies current attitudes to correction and some of the uncertainties around it. The received view has been that when students are involved in accuracy work it is part of the teacher's function to point out and correct the mistakes the students are making. In Chapter 6, A4 we called this 'teacher intervention' – a stage where the teacher stops the activity to make the correction.

During communicative activities, however, it is generally felt that teachers should not interrupt students in mid-flow to point out a grammatical, lexical, or pronunciation error, since to do so interrupts the communication and drags an activity back to the study of language form or precise meaning. Indeed, according to one view of teaching and learning, speaking activities in the classroom, especially activities at the extreme communicative end of our continuum (see Chapter 6, A4), act as a switch to help learners transfer 'learnt' language to the 'acquired' store (Ellis 1982) or a trigger, forcing students to think carefully about how best to express the meanings they wish to convey (Swain 1985: 249). Part of the value of such activities lies in the various attempts that students have to make to get their meanings across; processing language for communication is, in this view, the best way of processing language for acquisition. Teacher intervention in such circumstances can raise stress levels and stop the acquisition process in its tracks.

If that is the case, the methodologist Tony Lynch argues, then students have a lot to gain from coming up against communication problems. Provided that they have some of the words and phrases necessary to help them negotiate a way out of their communicative impasses, they will learn a lot from so doing. When teachers intervene, not only to correct but also to supply alternative modes of expression to help students, they remove that need to negotiate meaning, and thus they may deny students a learning opportunity. In such situations teacher intervention may sometimes be necessary, but it is nevertheless unfortunate – even when we are using 'gentle correction' (see C3 below). In Tony Lynch's words, '... the best answer to the question of when to intervene in learner talk is: as late as possible' (Lynch 1997: 324).

Nothing in language teaching is quite that simple, of course. There are times during communicative activities when teachers may want to offer correction or suggest alternatives because the students' communication is at risk, or because this might be just the right moment to draw the students' attention to a problem. Furthermore, intensive correction can be just as unpleasant during accuracy work too. It often depends on how it is done, and, just as importantly, who it is done to. Correction is a highly personal business and draws, more than many other classroom interactions, on the rapport between teacher and students. As one student once told me, a good teacher 'should be able to correct people without offending

them' (Harmer 1998: 2). This means, for example, not reacting to absolutely every mistake that a student makes if this will de-motivate that student. It means judging just the right moment to correct. In communicative or fluency activities it means deciding if and when to intervene at all.

C2 Feedback during accuracy work

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, correction is usually made up of two distinct stages. In the first, teachers show students that a mistake has been made, and in the second, if necessary, they help the students to do something about it. The first set of techniques we need to be aware of, then, is devoted to showing incorrectness. These techniques are only really beneficial for what we are assuming to be language slips rather than embedded errors. The students are being expected to be able to correct themselves once the problem has been pointed out. If they cannot do this, however, we need to move on to alternative techniques.

- **Showing incorrectness:** this can be done in a number of different ways.
  1. Repeating: here we can ask the student to repeat what they have said, perhaps by saying *Again?* which, coupled with intonation and expression, will indicate that something is not clear.
  2. Echoing: this can be a precise way of pin-pointing an error. We repeat what the student has said emphasising the part of the utterance that was wrong, e.g. **Flight 309 GO to Paris?* (said with a questioning intonation). It is an extremely efficient way of showing incorrectness during accuracy work.
  3. Statement and question: we can, of course, simply say *That's not quite right*, or *Do people think that's correct?* to indicate that something has not quite worked.
  4. Expression: when we know our classes well, a simple facial expression or a gesture (for example a wobbling hand), may be enough to indicate that something does not quite work. This needs to be done with care as the wrong expression or gesture can, in some circumstances, appear to be mocking or cruel.
  5. Hinting: a quick way of helping students to activate rules they already know (but which they have temporarily 'disobeyed') is to give a quiet hint. We might just say the word 'tense' to make them think that perhaps they should have used the past simple rather than the present perfect. We could say 'countable' to make them think about a concord mistake they have made. This kind of hinting depends upon the students and the teacher sharing **metalanguage** (linguistic terms) which, when whispered to students, will help them to correct themselves.
  6. Reformulation: an underrated correction technique is for the teacher to repeat what the student has said correctly, reformulating the sentence, but without making a big issue of it, for example:

     Student: I would not have arrived late if I heard the alarm clock.
     Teacher: If I had heard ...
     Student: ... if I had heard the alarm clock.

In all the procedures above, teachers hope that students will be able to correct themselves once the teacher has indicated that something was wrong. However, where students do not know or understand what the problem is because we are dealing with an error or an attempt that is beyond the students' knowledge or capability, the teacher will want to help the students to get it right.

- **Getting it right:** if the student is unable to correct herself, or respond to reformulation, we need to focus on the correct version in more detail. We can say the correct version emphasising the part where there is a problem (e.g. *Flight 309 GOES to Paris*) before saying the sentence normally (e.g. *Flight 309 goes to Paris*), or we can say the incorrect part correctly (e.g. *Not 'go'. Listen, 'goes'*). If necessary we can explain the grammar (e.g. *We say 'I go', 'you go', 'we go', but for 'he', 'she' or 'it' we say 'goes', for example 'He goes to Paris', or 'Flight 309 goes to Paris'*), or a lexical issue (e.g. *We use 'juvenile crime' when we talk about crime committed by children; a 'childish crime' is an act that is silly because it's like the sort of thing a child would do*). We will then ask the student to repeat the utterance correctly.

  Sometimes we ask students to correct each other. We might say *Can anyone help Jarek/Krystyna?* and hope that other students know the correct version of the utterance – after which the student who made the mistake should be able to say the sentence, question, or phrase accurately.

  Student-to-student correction works well in classes where there is a genuinely cooperative atmosphere; the idea of the group helping all of its members is a powerful concept. Nevertheless it can go horribly wrong where the error-making individual feels belittled by the process, thinking that they are the only one who does not know the grammar or vocabulary. We need to be exceptionally sensitive here, only encouraging the technique where it does not undermine such students.

C3 Feedback during fluency work

The way in which we respond to students when they speak in a fluency activity will have a significant bearing not only on how well they perform at the time but also on how they behave in fluency activities in the future (see Chapter 17C on how to counter negative expectations in productive skill activities). We need to respond to the content not just the language form; we need to be able to untangle problems which our students have encountered or are encountering, but these are things we may well do after the event, not during it. Our tolerance of error in fluency sessions will be much greater than it is during more controlled sessions. Nevertheless, there are times when we may wish to intervene during fluency activities, just as there are ways we can respond to our students once such activities are over.

- **Gentle correction:** if communication breaks down completely during a fluency activity, we may well have to intervene. If our students cannot think of what to say, we may want to prompt them forwards. If this is just the right moment to point out a language feature we may offer a form of correction.

Provided we offer this help with tact and discretion there is no reason why such interventions should not be helpful.

Gentle correction can be offered in a number of ways. We might simply reformulate what the student has said in the expectation that they will pick up our reformulation (see C2 above), even though it hardly interrupts their speech, for example:

Student: I am not agree with you ...
Teacher: I don't agree ...
Student: I don't agree with you because I think ...

It is even possible that students can learn something new in this way when they are making an attempt at some language they are not quite sure of.

We can use a number of other accuracy techniques of showing incorrectness too, such as echoing and expression, or even say *I shouldn't say X, say Y*, etc. But because we do it gently and because we do not move on to a 'getting it right' stage – our intervention is less disruptive than a more accuracy-based procedure would be.

Over-use of even gentle correction will, however, be counter-productive. By constantly interrupting the flow of the activity, we may bring it to a standstill. What we have to judge, therefore, is whether a quick reformulation or prompt may help the conversation move along without intruding too much or whether, on the contrary, it is not especially necessary and has the potential to get in the way of the conversation.

- **Recording mistakes:** as we saw in Chapter 4, B8, we frequently act as observers, watching and listening to students so that we can give feedback afterwards. Such observation allows us to give good feedback to our students on how well they have performed, always remembering that we want to give positive as well as negative feedback.

  One of the problems of giving feedback after the event is that it is easy to forget what students have said. Most teachers, therefore, write down points they want to refer to later, and some like to use charts or other forms of categorisation to help them do this, as in the following example:

Grammar	Words and phrases	Pronunciation	Appropriacy

In each column we can note down things we heard, whether they are particularly good or especially incorrect or inappropriate. We might write down errors such as **according to my opinion* in the words and phrases column, or **I haven't been yesterday* in the grammar column; we might record phoneme problems or stress issues in the pronunciation column and make a note of places where students disagreed too tentatively or bluntly in the appropriacy column.

We can also record students' language performance on audio or videotape. In this situation the students might be asked to design their own charts like the one above so that when they listen or watch they too will be recording more and less successful language performance in categories which make remembering what they heard easier. Another alternative is to divide students into groups and have each group watch for something different – for example, one group focuses on pronunciation, one group listens for the use of appropriate or inappropriate phrases, while a third looks at the effect of the physical paralinguistic features that are used. If teachers want to involve students more – especially if they have been listening to audiotape or watching the video – they can ask them to write up any mistakes they think they heard on the board. This can lead to a discussion in which the class votes on whether they think the mistakes really are mistakes.

Another possibility is for the teacher to transcribe parts of the recording for future study. However, this takes up a lot of time!

- **After the event:** when we have recorded student performance we will want to give feedback to the class. We can do this in a number of ways. We might want to give an assessment of an activity, saying how well we thought the students did in it, getting the students to tell us what they found easiest or most difficult. We can put some of the mistakes we have recorded up on the board and ask students firstly if they can recognise the problem, and then whether they can put it right. Or, as in the example above, we can write both correct and incorrect words, phrases, or sentences on the board and have the students decide which is which.

  When we write examples of what we heard on the board, it is not generally a good idea to say who made the mistakes since this may expose them in front of their classmates. Indeed, we will probably want to concentrate most on those mistakes which were made by more than one person. These can then lead on to quick teaching and re-teaching sequences which arrive opportunistically in this way (see Chapter 11, A2).

  Another possibility is for teachers to write individual notes to students, recording mistakes they heard from those particular students with suggestions about where they might look for information about the language – in dictionaries, grammar books, or on the Internet.

D Feedback on written work

The way we give feedback on writing will depend on the kind of writing task the students have undertaken, and the effect we wish to create. When students do workbook exercises based on controlled testing activities, we will mark their efforts right or wrong, possibly pencilling in the correct answer for them to study. However, when we give feedback on more creative or communicative writing (such as letters, reports, stories, or poems) we will approach the task with circumspection and clearly demonstrate our interest in the content of the students' work.

D1 Written feedback techniques

When handing back students' written work (on paper), or using a computer 'reviewing program' to give feedback on word-processed documents (see Chapter 10F), we can use a number of devices to help them write more successfully in the future:

- **Responding:** one way of considering feedback is to think of it as 'responding' to students' work rather than assessing or evaluating what they have done. When we respond, we say how the text appears to us and how successful we think it has been – and, sometimes, how it could be improved. Such responses are vital at various stages of the writing process cycle (see Chapter 18, B1). Thus students may show us a first draft of their work; our response will be to say how it is progressing and how we think they might improve it in subsequent drafts. The comments we offer them need to appear helpful and not censorious. Sometimes they will be in the margin of the student's work (or, on a computer, written as viewable 'comments'), or if more extensive may need a separate piece of paper – or separate computer document. Consider this example in which the teacher is responding in the form of a letter to a student's first draft of a composition about New Year's Eve:

Dear Gabrielle,

I really enjoyed reading your draft. You have some good expressions, e.g.

... you look to the dark sky and it seems like a special party.

Why don't you begin with that sentence? e.g.

I looked up at the dark sky and it seemed a special party. It was like an explosion everywhere. People were throwing fireworks into the sky, and everywhere there were lights.

Now at this point you can tell the reader what night it is:

It was New Year's Eve and everyone was celebrating.

Then you can explain what New Year's Eve means in Uruguay, how families and friends come together and how everyone has hopes for the future. You can end by coming back to the idea of fireworks.

You can organise your essay to have two times:

Past	*I looked up ... it seemed*	Introduction
General present	*Family celebrations in Uruguay are very important. People usually send greetings to each other ...*	
Past	????	Conclusion

From *Process Writing* by Ron White and Valerie Arndt (Pearson Education Ltd)

This type of feedback takes time, of course, but it can be more useful to the student than a draft covered in correction marks. However, it is designed specifically for situations in which the student will go back and review the draft before producing a new version.

When we respond to a final written product (an essay or a finished project) we can say what we liked, how we felt about the text, and what they might do next time if the students are going to write something similar.

Another constructive way of responding to students' written work is to show alternative ways of writing through reformulation (see C2 above). Instead of providing the kind of comments in the example above, we might say *I would express this paragraph slightly differently from you*, and then rewrite it, keeping the original intention as far as possible but avoiding any of the language or construction problems which the student's original contained. Such reformulation is extremely useful for students since by comparing their version with yours they discover a lot about the language. However it has to be done sympathetically, since we might end up 'steamrollering' our own view of things, forcing the student to adopt a different voice from the one they wanted to use.

- **Coding:** some teachers use codes, and can then put these codes either in the body of the writing itself, or in a corresponding margin. This makes correction much neater, less threatening, and considerably more helpful than random marks and comments. Frequently used symbols of this kind refer to issues such as word order, spelling, or verb tense as in the following table:

SYMBOL	MEANING	EXAMPLE
S	Incorrect spelling	S S I recieved jour letter.
W.O.	Wrong word order	W.O. We know well this city. W.O. Always I am happy here.
T	Wrong tense	If he will come, it will be too late.
C	Concord. Subject and verb do not agree	C Two policemen has come. C The news are bad today.
WF	Wrong form	WF We want that you come. WF That table is our.
S/P	Singular or plural form wrong	S We need more informations.
ʌ	Something has been left out	They said ʌ was wrong. He hit me on ʌ shoulder.
[ ]	Something is not necessary	[ ] It was too much difficult
?M	Meaning is not clear	?M Come and rest with us for a week. ?M The view from here is very suggestive.
NA	The usage is not appropriate	NA He requested me to sit down.
P	Punctuation wrong	P P Whats your name P He asked me what I wanted?

From *Teaching Writing Skills* by D Byrne (Pearson Education Ltd)

When we use these codes we mark the place where a mistake has been made and use one of the symbols in the margin to show what the problem is. The student is now in a position to correct the mistake.

We can decide on the particular codes and symbols we use with our students, making sure that they are quite clear about what our symbols mean through demonstration and example. We might also consider having a two-stage approach with simple and more complex codes for students at different levels (Cox and Eyre 1999).

It is worth remembering, however, that one of the marks that students respond to best is ticks when they have used language well, or made a particularly telling point.

A way of avoiding the over-correction of scripts, which also has the advantage of helping students to concentrate on particular features of written English, is **focusing**. In this mode we restrict feedback to a particular aspect of language. We can tell students that we will only give feedback on, say, spelling for the next piece of writing. On other occasions we can say that we are going to focus only on punctuation or tense usage or linking words or paragraph construction – or any other written feature we consider important for our students at that stage. Because we tell students this before they write, we guarantee their close attention to the features we have singled out.

D2 Finishing the feedback process

Except where students are taking achievement or proficiency tests (see Chapter 23, A1), written feedback is designed not just to give an assessment of the students' work, but also to help and teach. We give feedback because we want to affect our students' language use in the future as well as commenting upon its use in the past (see 'homework' in Chapter 24, A1).

When we respond to first and second written drafts of a written assignment we expect a new version to be produced which will show how the students have responded to our comments. In this way feedback is part of a learning process, and we will not have wasted our time. Our reasons for using codes and symbols is the same: if students can identify the mistakes they have made they are then in a position to correct them. The feedback process is only really finished once they have made these changes. If students consult grammar books or dictionaries as a way of resolving some of the mistakes we have signalled for them, the feedback we have given has had a positive outcome.

Chapter notes and further reading

- **Feedback and correction in general**
  See P Ur (1996: Module 17), and J Edge (1989). M Rinvolucri (1998) and R Bolitho et al. (1994) discuss many of the issues surrounding feedback and correction.

- **Written feedback**
  See J Muncie (2000) on the kind of feedback teachers should give.
- **Analysing errors**
  On interlanguage and analysing errors, see H D Brown (2000: Chapter 8).
- **Student self-assessment**
  M Harris (1997) shows how self-assessment is useful both for autonomous learners, but also for students in a more formal educational setting.
- **Teachers' attitudes to feedback and correction**
  In a fascinating teacher-training activity R Tanner (1992) shows how teachers do not necessarily enjoy the feedback methods which they use in class when they themselves are being corrected.