



Make It Stick: Speaking Corrections That Stay With Students

by [Alice Llanos](#) and [Amy Tate](#)

Mistakes are a normal part of the learning process. In fact, we want our students to make mistakes because that means they're trying out language and seeing what works and what doesn't work. When students are speaking spontaneously in the classroom and make these inevitable and beneficial mistakes, we're faced with a slew of options for how to respond. We might ignore them, especially if we are focusing on fluency rather than accuracy. But if we decide we want to address student mistakes in speaking, we have a lot to consider.

Correction Considerations

1. HOW Will We Correct Them?

- Will we reformulate the statement for students, giving them the correction?
- Will we prompt students with a gesture or a question, asking them to figure out and produce the correction?
- Will we do this orally or write it down?

The good news is that all types of corrective feedback can make a positive difference, so we would advise mixing it up, depending on the objective. For example, if our objective for a task is to have students use the past tense, then we might make students work for the correction by prompting with a question or gesture. However, if a student puts the stress on the wrong syllable of a word, we may give the student the correction directly. When reformulating for students, we make it clear that it's a correction because studies show students don't always recognize that a reformulation is an actual correction (Lyster et al., 2013). We often do this by having the student repeat the correction to us.

2. WHEN Will We Correct Them?

- The moment the mistakes happen?
- At the end of class?
- In a future class?

You can give the correction as soon as it happens or you can collect a few mistakes during a class period and review them with everyone at the end of the session. You can also provide written feedback the next class period. Again, flexibility with the timing of corrective feedback is imperative because there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It is not always beneficial to interrupt the flow of conversation. However, if your objective for a speaking task is focused on using a specific structure, correcting immediately might be the most effective approach.

3. WHAT Will We Correct?

- Will we focus on grammar mistakes?
- Pronunciation?
- Vocabulary?

Interestingly, studies show that while teachers love to give grammar feedback, it might not be the best use of our time (Mackey et al., 2016). Students tend to pay attention to and remember feedback on vocabulary and pronunciation. This makes sense, as these types of mistakes are more likely to cause a communication breakdown in the real world, as opposed to grammar mistakes (like verb tenses or articles), which a listener can figure out more easily from context. Consider what is most beneficial to the student you're working with, which may be correcting a commonly used word that has been mispronounced or suggesting a better word or phrase.

4. HOW MUCH Will We Correct?

- Every mistake?
- A few mistakes?
- One per student?

The answer is most likely *more*. Studies indicate students want more oral feedback than teachers generally want to give (Lyster et al., 2013; Roothoof & Breeze, 2016). As previously mentioned, there are certainly times when interrupting a conversation or discussion to give corrective feedback won't be appropriate, but it is helpful to reflect on how much feedback we give in a typical class (recording yourself teaching can reveal this) and think of how we could add more.

Making the Feedback Stick

As you can see, the literature on corrective feedback is full of tips for teachers. All the things *we* should do. But it isn't as detailed about what our *students* should do with the feedback we give them. How do we keep feedback from going in one ear and out the other? How do we make it stick?

Our goal lately has been to make our feedback stickier, and we think the best way to do that is *not* just giving students more feedback, but also providing them a fresh opportunity to use the feedback we've given. The repetition with a familiar (but not identical) topic and task gives them the chance to use a language form or a vocabulary word again and to hopefully get it right the

second time. Think of it like the writing process, where students revise and submit a final draft based on our feedback.

It may seem contradictory—that we’re asking students to revise *spontaneous* speech, but the variation in the topic or partner ensures that they have an opportunity for a new response. The following three activities share this common theme and take advantage of the technology available on every smartphone: a recording device. There are plenty of ways to apply this to your own teaching situation and students, whether in person or online. While these activities are written for an in-person setting, they can all be adapted to virtual teaching by using breakout rooms for pair and small group work.

Activity 1: Discuss and Summarize

Students work in pairs or small groups to discuss a topic. It could be the discussion questions after a reading, a conversation about their weekend plans, or responses to a list of prepared questions (Appendix A). Circulate (or visit breakout rooms online) to collect common mistakes.

After 10–15 minutes, everyone regroups and you put the mistakes on the board. Mistakes are categorized as G (Grammar), P (Pronunciation) or V (Vocabulary). Make sure you have some of each, especially pronunciation and vocabulary feedback, which, as we mentioned, can make the biggest impact on students. After discussing the mistakes and their corrections, students record themselves alone summarizing their group conversation. This gives them a second pass with the topic, plus the opportunity to use the language reviewed as a class.

Activity 2: Converse and Correct

This activity could take place on the first day of class as a twist on the classic “get to know a partner and report back,” or it could be used as a warm up at the beginning of class. Students have a 5-minute time limit to talk to a partner about a topic that is personal to them (family, education, job, hobby, likes/dislikes, friends, travel experience, etc.). They record the conversation, and, later, you listen to the recordings and note common mistakes with grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Also note mistakes made by each student on individual feedback forms (Appendix B).

During the next class period, lead an all-class discussion about the general mistakes, and then students listen to their recordings with their same partner to catch and correct any mistakes they made. After this, return the individual feedback forms, and students take time to correct those mistakes as well. Finally, students are paired with a new partner and record a new 5-minute conversation with the same topic as before, giving them a fresh opportunity to incorporate the corrective feedback.

Activity 3: Self-Evaluate

In this final task, the work of finding and correcting mistakes is all up to the student. In partners, students receive a list of questions that will require them to use a specific language form (verb tense, gerunds, adjective clauses, modals, etc.) or vocabulary items (Appendix C). Students record their discussion, then replay it and listen for their use of the targeted language form. They can use a checklist to keep track of their correct usage. Following this self-evaluation, students are paired with a new partner, where they discuss the same or similar questions, with the opportunity to use the correct language.

In all these activities, students get a second chance to complete a task after some type of corrective feedback. This ensures that the feedback isn't placed on a back shelf of the mind or in the trash can, but is used immediately after being received, for a chance to make it stick.

References

- Lyster, R., Saito, K., & Sato, M. (2013). Oral corrective feedback in second language classrooms. *Language Teaching*, 46(1), 1–40.
- Mackey, A., Park H. I., & Tagarelli, K. M. (2016). Errors, corrective feedback and repair. In Hall, G. (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 499–512). Routledge.
- Roothoof, H., & Breeze, R. (2016). A comparison of EFL teachers' and students' attitudes to oral corrective feedback. *Language Awareness*, 25(4), 318–335.

For Further Reading

Kerr, P. (2017). *Giving feedback on speaking. Part of the Cambridge Papers in ELT series.* Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Cambridge-Press_Whitepaper_Feedback_Speaking_2018.pdf

Alice Llanos began her teaching career in Tokyo, Japan and now resides in Houston, Texas, USA where she has been working at Rice University since 2006. She develops and teaches courses for several of Rice University's ESL programs, including the Intensive English Program, online certificate programs, and Coursera.

Amy Tate is a professor of ESOL at Lone Star College Montgomery, in Conroe, Texas, USA. She earned her MATESOL from the New School. Amy frequently presents at conferences, with an emphasis on activities that increase student confidence, fluency, and accuracy in speaking.

Appendix A: Discuss and Summarize Worksheet

Part 1: With a Partner	Part 2: Individual Recording
<p><i>Partner 1</i> Let's talk about your childhood.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Where did you grow up? ● Would you say it was a good place to grow up? Why? ● Who raised you? ● Did you spend a lot of time with family? How about your extended family? ● What would your family do together? <p><i>Partner 2</i> Let's talk about your childhood.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Where were you born and raised? ● Did you enjoy growing up there? Why? ● Did you have siblings? What was your relationship with them? ● What was an activity that you used to do during childhood? ● Did you see your extended family often? 	<p><i>Both Partners</i> Talk about a memory from your childhood. You should say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● what happened, ● when it happened, ● who it happened with, and ● why it's so memorable.

Part 1: With a Partner	Part 2: Individual Recording
<p><i>Partner 1</i> Let's talk about the future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think people will be getting around in the year 2040? • How do you think people will be communicating in 20 years? • What new technology will be adopted by 2040? • What is the biggest change that will have taken place by 2040? <p><i>Partner 2</i> Let's talk about the future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think people will be traveling in the year 2040? • Do you think there will be many changes made to the way people communicate? If so, what changes will have been made? • How will people's jobs be affected by technology in the next 20 years? • What is the biggest change that will have taken place by 2040? 	<p><i>Both Partners</i> Describe a technological innovation that you hope to see in the next 20 years. You should say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what it is, • who it will benefit, • when you think it will happen, and • why you hope to see this innovation.

Appendix B: Converse and Correct Worksheet

Note individual student mistakes in the left column. On the right, circle whether it was: Grammar (G), Pronunciation (P), or Vocabulary (V). You can write the correction in this column, or students can write it.

You Said:	Correction:
	G P V
	G P V
	G P V
	G P V
	G P V

Appendix C: Self-Evaluate Worksheet

Gerund Discussion Questions

<p><i>Set 1</i> Let's talk about your future plans.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What will you do when you finish studying English?2. Will you keep on using English in the future?3. What is something that you enjoy doing and you will keep on doing in the future?4. Have you considered...	<p><i>Set 2</i> Let's talk about our habits.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is a bad habit that you would like to quit doing?2. Are you more likely to finish doing (difficult or uninteresting) tasks right away or are you more likely to postpone doing these kinds of tasks?3. Have you ever considered changing something about yourself, such as changing your appearance, changing a personality characteristic, learning a new skill, doing something more or less often...?4. Do you ever think about...
--	---