

TKT: Module 1 – Thinking about the role of error

Overview: These practice materials by Russell Whitehead are designed to help with the Module 1 exam, in particular with the 'Background to language learning' section. These materials focus on the part errors play in the language learning process, in particular slips, interference and developmental errors. Please note that these practice materials are not about how to *correct* mistakes. This topic is covered elsewhere in the TKT.

Part of the Exam: Module 1 (Language and background to language learning and teaching): Background to language learning

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student

Time: 30–60 mins



Think about:

What different types of errors or mistakes do learners make, and how do they affect the language learning process? As you consider this, there are three things worth keeping in mind:

- Learners make different types of mistakes, and they make them for different reasons.
- Some errors may be important and some may not really matter in the long term.
- As teacher, we need to understand these differences.

Notes for teacher trainers

The topic of mistakes and language learning could be introduced dynamically. Give trainees a quick introductory mini-lesson in a language they don't know. This could be done by a friend or colleague, or just briefly prepared yourself with the opening pages of a beginner's book in a new language.

Afterwards, ask the trainees in groups to consider the types of mistakes they made during the mini-lesson. This gives a range of areas of error with which to start the training session.

Another way of introducing the topic of error is to ask the trainees to make a list of several things they have learnt to do (e.g. driving, cooking, using a computer programme, etc). Then ask them to consider what kinds of mistakes they have made when learning how to do each of those things. This will encourage trainees to think about language error from a broad perspective.

Engage interest and serious thought by giving trainees a list of fairly typical learner errors. This is particularly effective if all the examples are ones that have been heard or read in the school or schools where you all work. Next, tell the trainees to rank these errors in order of seriousness/ importance. Tell them there can be no equal rankings – the hierarchy must be absolute! Struggling with this slightly perverse task should get the trainees really thinking and talking about errors.

As an additional exercise for task g), expand the list of agree/disagree statements by doing the following activity:

- Ask all the trainees to each write a statement each about language learners and mistakes, etc on a strip of paper and give it to you. Display these around the classroom.
- The trainees should walk around, reading and informally discussing the statements with each other.
- Then lead a whole class discussion about the various issues raised.
- Finally, ask individuals, pairs or groups to write short paragraphs summarizing the issues and expressing some careful opinions about the subject of mistakes and language learning.

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Stage 1: Considering

- a) *Trainee's own answers*
- b) *Trainee's own answers*
- c) *Trainee's own answers*
- d) 1. A
2. C
3. B
- e) *Trainee's own answers*
- f) *Trainee's own answers*

Stage 2: Experimenting

- g) *Trainee's own answers*
- h) 1. C: *The learner is making mistakes because they are 'involved' in the discussion. These are not permanent errors; they are happening because the learner is distracted. The same might happen if the learner was tired or angry, for example.*
2. A: *The learners are overgeneralizing a rule they have studied. The rule is that in most cases in English, '-s' is added to the end of a noun to make it plural. These learners are, at this stage in their development, applying this rule in all cases, even where the noun is already plural.*
- i) *Trainee's own answers*
3. B: *This learner is allowing a feature of their L1 to influence their use of English. They are pronouncing English according to the rules of their L1, rather than according to the rules of English.*

Stage 3: Reflecting

Trainee's own answers

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Stage 1: Considering



Think about:

Why do so few adults learn to speak a foreign language so well that people believe they are native speakers of that language?

Worksheet

a) Write down three or four examples of mistakes you have heard your learners make recently.

b) For each of the mistakes you have written above, make a short note about what the mistake is – what has gone wrong.

c) Now try to repeat a) and b) for yourself, with your English or another language that you speak.



Think about:

What is the most important aspect of language learning to master, in your opinion – grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation?

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d) Match the definitions in the box below to the type of mistake they describe.

- A a slip
- B a developmental error
- C an error due to L1 interference

1. This type of mistake may be made by native speakers and by learners. It is a mistake produced when the speaker is distracted by something, e.g. by being tired or emotional or by concentrating hard on something else. A typical example would be saying, 'I is...' in one situation, but saying 'I am ...' usually.

2. This type of mistake is made only by second language learners (or bilingual children). It happens when the learner is influenced by their first language and tries unconsciously to use a part of it in the target language. Examples can include mistakes in pronunciation, verb forms, word order, vocabulary choice, etc.

3. This type of mistake is made by learners during the learning process. These mistakes are an important part of the learning process and everybody makes them, L1 and L2 language learners alike. Typical examples are using -ed for all past verb forms or calling all animals 'dog'. If the learning process stops early or is interrupted, then the errors which become permanent or fixed are often referred to as 'fossilized'.

e) Think about English and the other language(s) you know. Try to think of typical examples of developmental and interference errors.

f) Which of the three types of error do you think you, as a teacher, should correct? Why? When? How?



Think about:

Don't just think about English. Don't just think about language. Talk to colleagues who teach or study other subjects. Ask them what 'error' or 'mistake' means to them in their contexts, e.g. do maths learners make slips? Do science learners make developmental errors?

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Stage 2: Experimenting

g) Do you agree or disagree with the following statements made by teachers and learners? Why?

1. If only one student in a class makes a particular mistake, it doesn't matter.
2. I need my teacher to correct all my mistakes or I won't improve.
3. You should only worry about mistakes that block understanding.
4. If learners are allowed to repeat mistakes, these mistakes will become permanent.
5. It's all very well to talk about different categories of error, but a busy teacher with a large class can't sit about analyzing everything like that.
6. Mistakes are natural and will naturally disappear, if enough good quality practice is provided.
7. Hardly anybody learns to speak a foreign language perfectly, so it's a waste of time concentrating on a few mistakes here and there.
8. Mistakes are ugly and I hate making them, just like I hate doing anything badly.

If you can, discuss these with other teachers.

h) Now try this part of a sample TKT exam task. Match the teacher's comments about learners' mistakes with the categories of mistake (A–C).

Categories of mistake

- A** Developmental
- B** Interference
- C** Slip

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Teacher's comments:

- 1** The learner got so involved in the group discussion that they started making rather a lot of grammar mistakes.
- 2** Most of the learners in my class put '-s' on the end of everything they want to be plural – so they say *cars* OK, but they also say *peoples*, *childrens*, and so on.

i) **Can you add some more statements like 1 and 2 above from your own experience? What category of mistake are they? Maybe you can ask your colleagues to say something about the role of error in their classrooms.**

What category of mistake is this statement?

- 3** In this learner's L1, 'r' is always pronounced, so in English they pronounce the 'r' in words like 'better', 'part' and 'perfect', which can make them hard to understand sometimes.

Stage 3: Reflecting

Set yourself a target

For the next few weeks, keep notes (why not start a new notebook, *The Book of Errors?*) of mistakes you hear (or read) learners, other teachers and yourself making.

Come back to this later

Read through these materials again in a few weeks' time. What have you forgotten? Have your ideas changed? It might be interesting to see if your ideas for part f), in particular, change over time.

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Suggestion for independent learning

When you have a few spare moments, look through your notes on learner and teacher errors, and consider them in relation to the categories and issues raised in these materials. If you can, discuss these with other teachers, a trainer, etc.

An interesting project would be to do this with one or two learners over a longer period of time. This would enable you to analyse which errors were slips, interference or developmental errors. You would also be able to see what features might become fossilized.



Don't forget:

We really can learn from mistakes. When your students are doing some groupwork, monitor their performance. Write down some of the things they say which contain mistakes.

Photocopy these and give a handout to each group. Ask them to discuss what is wrong, and how to correct it in each case. Then have a class discussion about the mistakes. The mistakes give you and the learners the chance to clear up queries about language points and strengthen learning.