

Identifying Errors and Correcting Them

Unit 2: The aims of this unit are:

- to get to know and compare a variety of useful tools and resources that may help you identify errors and correct them
- to analyze the reasons why the learners might make these mistakes
- to develop criteria of acceptability
- to practice finding typical mistakes in student work
- to improve your own language skills

As non-native teachers of English we often face the difficulty of deciding whether a learner's sentence or utterance is in fact correct and acceptable. Some learner language may sound odd to our ears but we are not sure whether this is the case because we have never heard it, or because it is really unacceptable in English. What can you do in order to find out?

Acceptability: Criteria for defining what is a mistake

Find out more about the following topics by sharing the information on the little cards provided by your teacher. Do not show or swap cards with your classmates but share the information orally, summarizing the main points on your card.

Topic	Swan:2005
1. What is 'standard English?'	308/1 and 5
2. What is a dialect? Dialect forms:	308/2 and 309/2
3. What kind of English should learners study?	308/5,6,7

4. Divided usage:	309/3
5. Prescriptive and descriptive rules	309/4 312/9
6. When do mistakes become correct?	309/5
7. Kinds of English: spoken and written English – complexity of sentences – structures – vocabulary	310/1 310/2 310/3
8. Kinds of English: formality	311/1,2,3

Finding mistakes:

Look at the following examples and decide which of them are correct (+), which are incorrect (–), and which you are not sure about (?). How and where can you find an answer?

1. She suggested that he leave.
2. You gotta be joking.
3. Soccer players who wore green wristbands were sacked.
4. This argument doesn't hold water.
5. He's Dutch, or better Belgian [Swan 157](#)
6. Will everybody take their seats, please. [Swan 528](#)
7. I just wanted to leave, when the phone rang.
8. She accepted the offer with a heavy heart.
9. He's an honest man with a clean conscience.
10. She is sitting on the fence and doesn't want to commit herself.
11. Dear Sir, I've just been sacked, so I am looking for a new job.
12. I look forward to seeing you next week.
13. Could you look if Ann's in the kitchen?
14. The students are supposed to do the homework until Friday.
15. Don't beat about the bush – get straight to the point.
16. He's a thorn in my eye.
17. I think I cannot come to your party.
18. I have to eat less, I really want to lose some weight. [Swan 361](#)
19. I dunno but I gotta go.

20. I think she won't come to the party. (Swann 369)
21. He don't like it. I wants a rest. Swan 288,
22. John and me went to the cinema (Swan 429)
23. Somebody's dropped their keys. (Swann 528)
24. I'll control your homework until next week.
25. This is a good example for a preposition mistake.
26. It would be good if we'd get some rain. (Swann 262 , c)
27. I don't hope it rains. (Swan 369)
28. Please explain me what you want.
29. The murderer was hanged on May 15th 1885.
30. With fifteen I really didn't know what career I would embark on one day.
31. The injured girl was brought to the nearest hospital.
32. Many children lost their life in the floods.
33. I didn't have the possibility to go to England...
34. Many young people would like an own car.
35. Some persons never shop in a supermarket.
36. The biggest problem are people who...
37. I have a bad cough, I must stop to smoke.
38. He has much money but little time.
39. She spoke a very good English.

Useful Resources:

Below you will find a short list of resources that might help you decide whether a learner's utterance or sentence is correct or not. Most of these resources should definitely be present in every English teacher's personal library.

Grammar/Usage

Michael Swan. 2005. Practical English Usage. OUP:

For all kinds of grammar and usage questions Swan is certainly one of the most helpful tools on my desk. Swan also offers a very useful list of the 130 most common mistakes that learners of English make.

When I am looking for helpful explanations and remedial activities for my students, I use the following books:

David Newby. 1992. *Grammar for Communication, ÖBV together with*

David Newby. 1992. *Grammar for Communication, Exercises and Creative Activities, ÖBV*

Michael Swan & Catherine Walter. 1997. *How English Works, A Grammar Practice Book, OUP*

Dictionaries:

Collins Cobuild English Dictionary: Comes with a CD that makes checking vocabulary questions fast and effortless. Excellent sample sentences of each headword at a mouse-click. The CD also includes the Word Bank of English, a huge corpus of modern British and American English.

For Linux users: the program also runs very well under Wine.

The new **Oxford Collocations Dictionary** (2009). OUP is a fantastic tool to check for possible collocations and to expand your vocabulary. The new edition comes with a CD that includes very helpful exercises (crosswords, sentence completion, matching...). Fast and simple!

For Linux users: runs very well under Wine.

The New Macmillan English Dictionary: Includes lots of collocations and language awareness pages, writing aids and grammar information. Very clear layout!!! High frequency words are marked in red.

The new Macmillan also comes with a CD. The program offers more than just the dictionary (exercises, collocations etc) but it is much slower than the Collins Cobuild CD and takes a long time to open and find what you are looking for. Moreover you have to insert the CD once a month in order to run the program, which is a bit of a nuisance especially if you want to use it on a laptop or netbook.

Longman Language Activator: A very helpful dictionary that gives a lot of information on the usage of the words.

Online Resources:

Vocabulary.com: A wonderful website and app that will help you find out the correct usage and meaning of tricky words. Install it on your phones – it's great. Use it with upper-school students to expand their vocabulary.

LEO (<http://pda.leo.org/>) and **DICT** (www.dict.cc) are very useful online dictionaries that give useful lists of sample phrases and collocations. For lower intermediate learners the information is not always helpful and often leads to the typical dictionary errors. Use them with care!!!

Corpora:

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (<http://www.americancorpus.org/>)

For trickier questions and odd-sounding language in students' work I often use the Corpus of Contemporary American English. It is an excellent tool that will show you if the phrase you have entered is actually commonly used and idiomatic. The CCAE is free, but you will be asked to register after 15 uses. It is safe to do so.

The CCAE is also very useful when writing texts. Check if your 'daring expressions' are actually English.

My
personal
favorite !!!

Google:

Of course you can also enter a word or phrase into google and see if other people have used it before you. A word of warning: The information might not always be reliable – you might copy other people's mistakes. Check the type of publication and origin of the documents to see if they can be trusted.

Native speakers:

Of course, native speakers can be very helpful in cases of doubt. You should, however, be aware of the fact that a native speaker can only give you his/her personal views on language. When asking several native speakers, you will often get very different answers, depending on their origin, training and personal background. Linguists call this phenomenon *divided usage*. (Swan.2005:291)

**HOMEWORK:**

1. Read „Responding to student writing“, Hyland, 2003: 177-209. Highlight interesting passages that you would like to discuss in our next session. Do all the suggested reflections in note form.
2. Read the following learner text, underline the mistakes and suggest an acceptable version. Be prepared to explain your corrections to your classmates in our next session.

Pure Beauty

Year 6

Task: Describe an amazingly beautiful person that you happened to meet.

... and there she was. My view peaked up from my phone when a little bell rang because the door was opened. The sun lit up her light, colorful dress which moves preciously in the breeze. Her perfume swiftd through the room and softly touched my nose when she tossed her goldish, brown hair out of her face to see where she was going. Her beautiful brownish, shaved legs ended with balerinas. She kind of danced through the door swirling her dress and tossing her hair Her shiny eyes were flashing green and her warming smile couldn't keep my eyes off of her.

She stopped twirling and stood in front of some posters faced towards me. Her female fingers turned the spindel where all the posters were on but she never glanced over to me. The eyes scrolled up and down in a thoughtful way. as if she weren't sure which poster to take. As she carefully picked one, she risked one peak over to where I was standing. My eyes got hooked up with hers and faded off into a different world. It seemed as it were hours even though it was just for two seconds. Frozen of her pretty I didn't move from where I was till she left the shop.

And all that stayed was these two seconds my eyes reached hers. I've sadly never seen her since that day.