Teaching attitudes toward mistakes in the learning process
(Actitudes de la enseñanza ante los errores en el proceso de aprendizaje)

Title: Teaching attitudes toward mistakes in the learning process. Target: Profesorado de inglés.

In the educational system of primary and secondary school, having mistakes in a foreign language as well as in the mother tongue has been considered as a failure.

Firstly, teachers regard the ill-formed productions as a sign to identify weak students or little motivated learners. This view is automatically reflected in the marks they give, which affect enormously the view that the pupils have of their own mistakes. There is also the parents’ attitude, conditioned by the teachers’ marks, who blame the whole educational system for their children’s mistakes. With this negative view on errors, they also blame the teachers and the pupils.

All this has inevitably a negative effect on the learners themselves. They view their mistakes as a reflection of their incapability to learn a foreign language. As a result, they tend to use the foreign language only when they are completely sure that what they are saying is absolutely right. Obviously, this leads to a drastic reduction of utterances and to a limited number of opportunities to practise. The learners think that the aim to achieve in English classes is to write a composition as if they were native speakers of English or produce a speech free from mistakes. This thought is not realistic, for getting to learn a foreign language requires much practice and numberless productions to do it right. This situation can be compared to someone who is learning a sport; at the beginning the person needs to know the rules but the way to improve is by practising.
Julian Edge provides an explanation for the emphasis on accuracy from the language teachers. English is not the first language of the majority of teachers of English. Like their own students, they have learned it at school. The reaction of some of them, because of their concern about their own mistakes, they do not speak English freely in class, and only do it when they are sure that what they have prepared to say is correct. Edge asserts that “even if the teacher tells the students that they should try to express themselves freely, it will be difficult for the students to behave in this way when they see that it is not the teacher’s way”. As a consequence of this, there has always been a general atmosphere of war-like campaign against ill-formed productions, which I call anti-mistakes crusade. The emphasis of the teaching, however, must be put on communication, regarding the mistakes as a natural consequence of the learning process. Edge proposes to call them learning steps. After all, mistakes may also be produced in our own language and what should matter is the lack of communicative competence.

Mistakes are signs of the different stages the learners are going through. What is more, they can even be useful to improve the students’ written texts and oral productions. However there are divisions among teachers and scholars. Some regard the errors as the logical product of the learning process. For instance, Santos confirms that some authors give mistakes a positive value, making use of the Contrastive Analysis in order to correct them. Others, on their part, consider that the mistake itself is a negative influence in the learning process, a transgression of the linguistic system of the model language. They believe that with a proper teaching there would be no mistakes.

Asserting that mistakes can be used as learning tools means that they can be helpful to improve the learning quality of the students. This concept of tools has been proposed by Bobb. She believes that using the students’ mistakes in the written and oral productions as learning tools have far more advantages than only correcting them. Getting the learner who made the mistake as involved as possible in the correction procedure makes it more likely that the correction will be remembered. Here are some proposals for mistakes as tools:

- Letting the student detect the mistake and correct it on his/her own.
- Share the mistakes with the whole class, making a list of sentences such as: *Where did they went last night?* *There was many people.*
- Find contexts in which a problematic word might appear, and ask the learners to complete the sentence, for example: It is a ....... cat, to review the position of adjectives in English.
- Write a list with minimal pairs with which students find problems, e.g. work – walk. Let them contrast both sounds, repeating after the teacher.
- Try peer correction. In small groups they read aloud a list of words which has been previously studied in class, trying to practise the correct pronunciation. One problem it might bring is that students may find it very difficult to change their habits if they are not used to
correcting each other. The teacher, nevertheless, can encourage this aspect of learning in order to avoid little participation.

- **Telling the students to create their own diary with mistakes.** This activity should better be done at the end of the year. The learners will copy their own mistakes found in exams, writing tests or exercises in three different lists, according to the nature of the mistakes: spelling (as which for which), grammar (few sugar for little sugar), and vocabulary (actually for nowadays).

Some authors claim that other things can be done which indirectly improve the learner’s production. Paying attention to what the learner says, not only to the errors he/she makes, and respond to it. This behaviour will surely help students see that the aim when writing or speaking in a foreign language is not a production completely free of any mistake. Others propose nonverbal expressions of approval. Another suggestion gives emphasis on the physical exercise of the vocal apparatus as a way to improve the foreign language pronunciation; instead of working specifically on pronunciation, rhythm and intonation, why not systematically help students to become more creative in the use of their voices.

The identification of the mistakes into slips, errors, and attempts and their classification may also be a great help for the students themselves. The learner who continues to advance will be able to see how the same mistake will be an attempt, later an error, and finally a slip. Seeing the way they are improving is another factor that contributes to their motivation in learning. The teacher can also prepare games with the errors and attempts which serve as a review.

Make our students work with common mistakes and experiment with them will contribute to a more effective correction, and can also motivate them to be aware of their own learning. Moreover, they will see mistakes as a natural and logical result of the learning process, which will help them not be ashamed to speak and write. Self-confidence is another benefit of regarding mistakes as learning steps rather than infractions of the rule. Emphasis should be focused on communication not on mistakes.

**Bibliografía**

