4ydd Gynhadledd Dysgu ac Addysgu

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# Crynoldebau / abstracts

On the Advantages of Mistakes

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“You learn from your mistakes” – says the cliché. In strict pedagogical terms, this is only partly true: you don’t learn from committing them, you learn from correcting them, and only if this correction is done under controlled circumstances.

I intend to present a method that was introduced in French grammar classes as an ad hoc experience, but has now been turned into a regular practice following excellent student feedback. It is general practice in language teaching to take a look at some of the mistakes committed during an assessment. While unquestionably beneficial, it has some problematic points. First, students might be embarrassed to see their own mistakes made public, even if this is done without naming the “culprit”. Second, students' mistakes are random – they will not methodically cover the whole spectrum of what needs pedagogical reinforcement.

Attentively reading a document doctored by the teacher to contain certain mistakes allows students to better internalise different aspects of a grammar rule. Particularly in a British context, where students received very little (if any) formal training in English grammar, students' ‘grammatical awareness’ is often rather poor when they start university. Working to correct a document containing errors that systematically target regularly occurring mistakes by British students (such as confusions around the various possible translations of –ing structures into foreign languages) allows them to reach a more conscious way of ‘thinking the language’ – not only the target language, but any language.

A second important aspect of this exercise is speed. Students, particularly in their final year, face a number of writing assignments, and excellent content is regularly ruined by poor grammar, due to lack of thorough proofreading. The error-finding exercises offered in Final Year French target the development of this skill: being able to turn error localisation or “debugging” into something of a quick reflex.

This talk also hopes to inspire a debate, collecting opinions from teachers in other fields where localisation of mistakes is an important practice, such as mathematics and physics, or computer science.