

# Real-Time Teaching

## Responding When Students Don't Get It

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**H**ave you ever thought that you should have said something differently when your students appeared to still not understand after you responded to them? Have you wondered how you could have better explained a complex concept? Realizing that how we respond to an incorrect answer significantly influences students' eventual understanding, teachers daily ponder the best ways to offer verbal scaffolds that support their students' understanding. Of course, saying "you're wrong" isn't going to result in increased learning, but simply supplying the correct answer isn't going to do the trick either. Resolving errors requires a complex set of interactions between students and teachers, with the goal of ensuring that students experience success in their learning endeavors. We highlight a teaching process we use that resolves misconceptions, then turn our attention to error correction gone wrong.

### Guided Instruction

As part of a gradual release of responsibility framework, there are times when the students and teacher jointly construct meaning. It's the "we do it together" aspect of teaching and learning. We call this phase *guided instruction* and delineate its four recursive processes as the following:

1. Questions to check for understanding—During guided instruction, the teacher poses a question for students to consider. The question should be designed to assess both students' understanding of the topic and their ability to synthesize and evaluate information. It is important to note that poorly constructed questions will negatively impact the rest of the process, and teachers can only resolve errors and misconceptions at the level of the questions they ask. Resolving a misconception by asking a knowledge-level question might result in increasing students' basic levels of knowledge but will not result in supporting their ability to synthesize or evaluate content.
2. Prompts for cognitive and metacognitive processes—When errors or misconceptions arise in response to checking for understanding, this second step provides the teacher with an opportunity to prompt the learner. We reserve the word *prompt* for cognitive and metacognitive work. For example, a teacher might prompt a student by saying, "Consider what you would do in this situation," then asking, "When you think about the character's actions, does your answer still hold?" Also, you can ask a

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metacognitive question, such as, “How do you know you’re right?” Essentially, prompts are designed to facilitate students’ cognitive and metacognitive processes such that they develop habits of thinking about the texts they read.

3. Cues to shift attention—When prompts for cognitive or metacognitive work fail to resolve the error or misconception, the next step is to cue the learner in a more direct way by guiding students’ attention to something missed or not noticed. Of course, there are a number of cues that teachers can use (e.g., physical, verbal, visual, gestural, environmental, positional). For example, telling students, “Look at the chart at the bottom of the page to help with your answer,” shifts the reader’s attention to a salient feature. Essentially, cues are designed to help students become expert noticers, so they learn to use resources in their responses.
4. Direct explanations and modeling—When prompts and cues fail to resolve the error or misconception, the teacher can provide the student with a direct explanation while modeling his or her thinking. By doing so, the teacher reassumes the primary responsibility of increasing student understanding. At the end of a direct explanation, the teacher again checks for understanding.

## Error Correction Gone Wrong

There are three errors to avoid when using guided instruction. The first concerns group configuration. It is difficult to implement guided instruction, or even differentiated instruction, with the whole class. When

a teacher checks the whole class for understanding, and a student clearly has an incorrect answer or misconception, the teacher has to address the issue. Failing to do so places the student with the wrong answer at risk and introduces incorrect information to others in the class. To address the issue, the teacher begins prompting and cueing the student, perhaps even moving to direct explanation to resolve the error. However, the rest of the class then begins to disengage and go off task. While attempting to resolve the error made by one student (and perhaps others), the teacher moves into individual helping while others become bored.

The second error to avoid concerns learned helplessness. If the teacher does not scaffold student understanding by using prompts and cues, and instead begins a direct explanation, students are not required to think or notice along the way. Although we have all done this in the interest of time, avoidance of the use of prompts and cues results in students who expect the adults around them to supply information. Over time, these students develop learned helplessness instead of learning to think independently.

The third error to avoid is assigning a large number of independent tasks to students, which leaves little time for guided instruction in small groups. Having students work independently is an important aspect of a gradual release of responsibility framework, but extended amounts of time working alone while at school is not likely to result in increased student achievement. Instead, students need to work collaboratively in productive groups, so they can actively use academic language and consolidate their understanding of the content. They learn how to have a conversation using the tools of argumentation while they are also individually accountable for an outcome or product (e.g., Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009). While students work productively, the teacher can engage in guided instruction to resolve misconceptions and errors.

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So, what might guided instruction look like in the secondary classroom? A quick look around the room suggests students are working. Several are typing away on computers, others are reading in comfortable chairs, and still others are working and talking together at tables. The teacher is seated with a group

of four students. On the board is a purpose statement that reads, “We can analyze persuasive techniques that public speakers use by identifying key terminology that is convincing or sways our thinking.”

On closer examination, we see that the students working on computers are searching public speech records and writing analyses of these speeches. One of the groups at the tables is creating a poster that identifies specific techniques used by Martin Luther King Jr. Each student in that group is adding to the collaborative poster with a different colored marker. Another table group is creating a similar poster based on speeches by President John F. Kennedy.

The students with the teacher are talking, and each has a copy of Sojourner Truth’s (1851) “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech. The teacher invites one of the students to begin the conversation by summarizing the text.

Amanda: So, I think it’s about her wanting rights.

Jasmine: She’s saying that she is equal and should have the same rights.

Jack: Yeah, and she says that blacks and women should have equal rights.

Nick: She’s kinda hard to understand. I know she wants rights, but I don’t get her point. Saying you want rights isn’t gonna make people change.

Teacher: Nick, she does say she wants rights, but how is she trying to convince her audience? Remember, she’s trying to persuade them.

Nick: She uses repetition, I get that. But saying it over ain’t gonna make it so.

Jasmine: The repetition is kinda cool, though. It makes her speech kinda like a poem.

Teacher: What else does she do to persuade her audience? Jack?

Jack: Well, I see repetition like Nick. I don’t know.

Teacher: Think about the time, historical time. It’s 1851.

Nick: Yeah, only men had full rights.

Amanda: Oh, and women were trying to get rights back then at that time.

Jack: So, is she saying that she should get the same rights if women get rights?

Jasmine: Yeah, I think that’s it. She’s saying, “Hey, I’m a woman, too, and I should get rights when other women get rights.”

Amanda: It’s hard to think about this. There really was a time when everyone didn’t have rights.

Teacher: There sure was. But what other technique is she using here to make her point? [All of the students look at her and stare. No one answers.] Look right here. [points to a line of text]

Jasmine: Yeah, that’s the question she keeps repeating.

Nick: I got it. It’s not just repeating it. The question is rhetorical. There really isn’t an answer to be provided. She provides the answer and proof herself.

Teacher: Interesting. And what about here? [points to a line of text]

Jack: No way, I missed it before. It’s emotional, and it’s an analogy. I guess I got too much focused on the repetition to notice that.

The conversation continues with the teacher prompting and cueing her students. In doing so, she guides their understanding, so they can apply what they have learned with their peers in productive group work and in their independent learning tasks. She did not simply quiz the whole class and then move into individual helping, nor did she jump to direct explanation by telling her students what to think. Instead, she scaffolded their understanding, saying the just right thing to get the learners to do the work. She used instructional moves and language that provided explicitly intended differentiated feedback (Gainer & Lapp, 2010). By doing so, she encouraged, supported, extended, and assessed accountable student learning that was occurring within the context of guided instruction. This is certainly a goal that every teacher should strive to reach.

**Note**

*All student names are pseudonyms.*

**References**

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