

Lesson Plan: Debugging Your Syntax

Root-cause error analysis for C1+ students

Level: C1-C2

Time: 50-60 minutes

Focus: Error awareness, self-correction

Best for: Students who plateau on repeated mistakes

Learning objective

By the end of the lesson, students can classify their own recurring errors by root cause (retrieval-under-pressure vs. L1 interference) and build a personal tracking habit that targets the actual fault rather than correcting each instance as a one-off.

1. Warmer (5 minutes)

Ask: think of a mistake you've been corrected on more than once, in different sentences, over the past few weeks. Don't share the mistake yet, just notice that it recurs. Ask: why do you think it keeps happening even after correction?

2. Presentation: two kinds of bugs (10 minutes)

Introduce two categories of recurring error:

Lexical memory leak. You know the word, but lose it under real pressure, a fast meeting, an exam clock, live conversation. The word isn't gone, retrieval is overloaded. Fix: practise retrieval speed under timed, mildly pressured conditions, not more vocabulary study.

Syntax configuration error. A first-language grammar pattern quietly overriding English's rules, in a consistent, predictable way, not randomly. Fix: identify your own specific pattern and watch for it deliberately, rather than treating each instance as unrelated.

3. Controlled practice: classify the bug (10 minutes)

For each error below, students decide: lexical memory leak, or syntax configuration error? Answer key on the last page.

1. A fluent speaker says "I have 25 years" instead of "I am 25 years old."
2. A student who knows the word "postpone" says "delay it for later" instead, mid-negotiation.
3. A student consistently omits articles before uncountable nouns: "I need information about the project."
4. A student who used "nevertheless" correctly in writing can't produce it at all in a live discussion.

4. Freer practice: personal bug tracking (15 minutes)

Individually, students list two or three of their own recurring errors from memory or recent feedback, and classify each as a memory leak or a configuration error. In pairs, discuss: does classifying it change what you'd actually do to fix it?

5. Application: the diagnostic habit (10 minutes)

Introduce a simple ongoing habit: keep a running list, not of individual mistakes, but of recurring bug types. When corrected on something, ask first: is this the same bug as before, wearing a different sentence? Practise this classification live, using two or three fresh example sentences supplied by the teacher.

6. Wrap-up (5 minutes)

Discuss: generic correction treats every mistake as a one-off and rarely produces lasting change. Root-cause correction targets the actual recurring fault, which is a much smaller list than it first appears, and far more fixable.

Answer key (controlled practice)

1. *Syntax configuration error — a fixed, recurring L1-pattern transfer (common with speakers whose L1 doesn't distinguish "have" from "be" for age).*
 2. *Lexical memory leak — the correct word is known but not retrieved under live pressure.*
 3. *Syntax configuration error — a consistent, rule-based gap (article use with uncountable nouns), not a one-off slip.*
 4. *Lexical memory leak — correct in low-pressure written production, unavailable under live retrieval demand.*
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