# What Teachers Can Do When Students Give an Incorrect Answer

In this *Education Week* article, New York City reading specialist Brooke McCaffrey describes a common classroom sequence: the teacher poses a question (“Who can tell me the part of the spider’s anatomy that it uses to spin a web?”), calls on a girl, gets an incorrect answer (“The spider’s abdomen?”), moves on to another student who answers correctly (“The spinnerette”), and notices that the first student slumps in her seat, visibly discouraged. Better to stick with the first student, says McCaffrey, but it has to be done strategically. Here’s one approach:

“Wow, Sarah, that’s excellent thinking. The body part that the spider uses to spin webs is located in the spider’s abdomen, so you were very close. However, the answer was not quite right. It’s a long word and it starts with /sp/. Would you like to try again?”

The teacher could also restate the question and/or give the student some additional think time. All of these strategies convey to the student, *I believe in you. I will not give up on you. I have high expectations for you.*

As McCaffrey tried this approach in her classroom, “it caused a slight feeling of anxiety in me. It can be an uncomfortable moment for a teacher when a student demonstrates confusion, and the natural inclination is to diminish that discomfort for both the teacher and the student. Moving on to another student makes an awkward moment pass quickly and allows the lesson to move on.”

McCaffrey realized that her body language and tone of voice were important when she didn’t call on another student. “If I conveyed any sort of urgency or frustration, sticking with a student began to feel more like putting a student in the hot seat. It became a high-pressure interaction, particularly when a student legitimately did not know the answer, regardless of the amount of cueing I provided.” The ideal sequence, she decided, was:

* Ask the question and give about seven seconds of wait time before calling on a student.
* Alternatively, have students turn and talk with a partner and listen in on the conversations to see what misconceptions they might have.
* Another strategy is having students write their answers on small whiteboards, which takes the pressure off verbal responses.
* When a student answers incorrectly, praise what was right about the answer.
* Cue in a way that addresses all students (“Let’s all think a little more about that”).
* Keep your expression and body language relaxed so students don’t feel any tension.
* Especially with math problems, do a quick review of the steps a student could take to get to the correct answer, which will help other students who are having difficulty.
* If the correct answer is not forthcoming, give the correct answer – without any sign of frustration or displeasure.

“In sticking with students,” McCaffrey concludes, “I found I changed the energy in my classroom. The quiet, shy students began taking more risks because it was no longer scary to supply a wrong answer. Wrong answers became opportunities for growth for all of us.”

“Sticking with Students: Responding Effectively to Incorrect Answers” by Brooke McCaffrey in *Education Week*, Jan 6, 2014 (published online)

<http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2014/01/06/fp_mccaffrey_sticking.html?qs=Brooke+McCaffrey>