

With his 1967 article, "The Significance of Learners' Errors", S. P. Corder changed the way teachers and researchers in SLA thought about learners' errors. Corder concludes that, if we know more about how learning occurs:

"We maybe able to allow the learner's innate strategies to dictate our practice and determine our syllabus; we may learn to adapt ourselves to *his* needs rather than impose upon him *our* preconceptions of *how* he ought to learn, *what* he ought to learn and *when* he ought to learn it" (Corder, 1967, p. 169; italics original).

In the time since his article was published, we have come to understand that errors are not necessarily indications that students have learned something incorrectly, but rather evidence regarding the current state of the learners' (constantly changing) internal language system. Larry Selinker, who worked with Corder in the 1960s, introduced the idea of interlanguage in 1972. The construct of interlanguage may be best understood as a question rather than a theory: "what if the language produced by second-language learners is systematic?" (Tarone, 2014, p. 23). Selinker argued that the learner's internal linguistic system is worthy of study in its own right.

In this workshop we will discuss what errors indicate in terms of language development and learning. We will consider how this evidence about the state of the learner's interlanguage can be assessed and used in instruction.

### Readings and Discussion Questions

**Reading 1:** Corder, S. P. (1967). The Significance of Learner's Errors. *The International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 5(4), 161-69.

Corder was the first to assert that no advances in teaching will be possible until we try to understand acquisition as a process within the learner. He was also the first to make the distinction between "input" and "intake."

Questions:

1. Why were Corder's suggestions and ideas considered groundbreaking at the time?
2. How does a change in focus from instruction to learning affect our understanding of second language acquisition?
3. On page 165, Corder asserts that errors are "adventitious artefacts[sic] of linguist performance and do not reflect a defect in our knowledge of our [L1]... it would be quite unreasonable to expect the learner of a second language not to exhibit such slips of the tongue (or pen), since he is subject to similar external and internal conditions when performing in his first or second language." Corder then distinguishes between errors of this nature, which he terms "mistakes," and errors that "reveal [the learner's] underlying knowledge of the language to date", a construct that has later been understood as the learner's interlanguage. In your own teaching experience, have you seen both mistakes and errors? Are they easy to distinguish?

**Reading 2:** Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2014). Documenting Interlanguage development. In Z. Han and E. Tarone (Ed.s), *Interlanguage: Forty Years Later*. John Benjamins: Amsterdam, 127-46.

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In this chapter, Bardovi-Harlig considered evidence for the state of a learner's interlanguage in three studies on L2 acquisition of tense-aspect morphology, pragmatics, and conventional expression. One of her overarching arguments is that:

“the study of acquisition of form in pragmatics, including grammar lexicon, and formulaic language, is the study of the development of alternatives. The study of use in pragmatics must be understood in light of the forms available to the learner at any given stage of interlanguage development” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2014, 137).

She mentions this in the section on pragmatics, but this idea is applicable to analyses of the interlanguage for any linguistic area. Errors may indicate a lack of alternatives, and thus use of a default form that may seem inappropriate in a given context.

**NOTE:** This article may seem packed with dense linguistic information, but I want to focus on her takeaways in each section. I have highlighted these areas in the questions below.

Questions:

1. In the section on the study of tense-aspect morphology, Bardovi-Harlig points out that her findings, which indicate that learners recognize the need to mark reverse-order reports, are only obvious because her analysis is not focused on either correct forms or errors (p. 135). Instead, she considers her approach one from “the interlanguage perspective,” which means that she focuses on how the learners perform the same action (reverse-order reports) as the native speakers, only with the linguistic material at the learners' disposal. What could you gain in the classroom by adopting this approach when analyzing your students' L2 performance?
2. In the section on conventional expressions, Bardovi-Harlig considers how “learner attempts at conventional expressions are influenced by both input... and interlanguage grammar” (p. 143). How do learners' attempts at these expressions reflect interlanguage grammar? Have you seen examples like the ones she provides (p. 142-143) in your students' speech?