Chapter 2 The nature of learner language

We have seen that the main way of investigating L2 acquisition is by collecting and describing samples of learner language. The description may focus on the kinds of errors learners make and how these errors change over time, or it may identify developmental patterns by describing the stages in the acquisition of particular grammatical features such as past tense, or it may examine the variability found in learner language. Let us consider each of these three areas in turn.

Errors and error analysis

At first sight, it may seem rather odd to focus on what learners get wrong rather than on what they get right. However, there are good <u>reasons for focusing on errors. What are these reasons?</u>

1. Errors are <u>conspicuous</u> feature of learner language, raising the important question of 'Why do learners make errors?'
2. It is <u>useful for teachers to know what errors learners make</u>.
3. Making errors may actually <u>help learners to learn when they self-correct</u> the errors they make.

Identifying errors

The first step in analysing learner errors is to <u>identify them</u>. This is in fact easier said than done. Look at the sample of learner language below. This is a transcription of a story, based on a series of pictures, told by Jean, an adult French learner of English. He told the story orally after having been given the chance to write it out first. Can you identify all the errors?

> *One day an Indian gentleman, a snake charmer, arrived in England by plane. He was coming from Bombay with two pieces of luggage. The <u>big of them</u> contained a snake. A man and a little boy <u>was</u> watching him in the customs area. The man said to the little boy 'Go and speak with this gentleman.' When the little boy was speaking with the traveller, the thief took the big suitcase and went out quickly. When the victim saw that he cried 'Help me! Help me! A thief A thief!' <u>The policeman was in this corner whistle but it was too late</u>. The two thieves <u>escape</u> with the big suitcase, took their car and went <u>in</u> the traffic. They passed near a zoo and <u>stop</u> in a forest. There they had a big surprise. The basket <u>contain</u> a big snake.*

- To identify errors we have to compare the sentences learners produce with what seem to be the normal or 'correct' sentences in the target language which correspond with them.

Sometimes this is fairly straightforward. For example, Jean says:

A man and a little boy <u>was</u> watching him.

It is not difficult to see that the correct sentence should be:

A man and a little boy <u>were</u> watching him.

Sometimes, however, learners produce sentences that are possible target-language sentences but not preferred ones. For example, Jean says: • ... went *in* the traffic. Is this an error? A native speaker would probably prefer to say:

... went *into* the traffic but *'in* the traffic' is not actually ungrammatical. At other times, it is difficult to reconstruct the correct sentence because we are not sure what the learner meant to say. An example is when Jean says: The *big* of them contained a snake. One way of reconstructing the correct sentence is:

The *bigger* of them contained a snake. According to this reconstruction, Jean has used 'big' instead of 'bigger'-an error in the use of a comparative adjective. But another possible way of reconstructing the sentence is:

The big *one* contained a snake. Here the error lies in using 'big of them' instead of 'big one'-an error in the use of the pronoun 'one'.

- It is clear that identifying the exact errors that learners make is often difficult.
- There is a further problem. How can we be sure that when a learner produces a deviant form it is not just an accidental slip of the tongue?

We need to distinguish **errors** and **mistakes.**

1. **Errors** reflect gaps in a learner's knowledge; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct.
2. **Mistakes** reflect occasional lapses in performance; they occur because the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows. E.g. from Jean's story:
   - The big of them *contained* a snake. He used the past tense of the verb 'contain' correctly. However, in the final sentence he says:
   - The basket ***contain*** a snake.

Clearly Jean *knows* what the past tense of 'contain' is as he has already used it correctly once. His failure to say 'contained' in the last sentence, then, might be considered a mistake.

How can we distinguish errors and mistakes?

1. One way might be to check the consistency of learners' performance. If they consistently substitute 'contain' for 'contained' this would indicate a lack of knowledge-an error. However, if they sometimes say 'contain' and sometimes 'contained', this would suggest that they possess knowledge of the correct' form and are just slipping up-a mistake.
2. Another way might be to ask learners to try to correct their own deviant utterances. Where they are unable to, the deviations are errors; where they are successful, they are mistakes.

Describing errors

Once all the errors have been identified, they can be described and classified into types. There are several ways of doing this:

1. One way is to classify errors into grammatical categories. We could gather all the errors relating to verbs and then identify the different kinds of verb errors in our sample-errors in the past tense, for example.
2. Another way might be to try to identify general ways in which the learners' utterances differ from the reconstructed target-language utterances. Such ways include:
   a) **Omission**:(i.e. leaving out an item that is required for an utterance to be considered grammatical),
   b) **'misinformation'** (using one grammatical form in place of another grammatical form), and c)
   c) **'misordering'** (putting the words in an utterance in the wrong order).
3. What does classifying errors in these ways help us to do?
   a. It helps us to diagnose learners' learning problems at anyone stage of their development and,
   b. to plot how changes in error patterns occur over time.
   c.

Explaining errors

1. Errors are, to a large extent, systematic and, to a certain extent, predictable. Errors are not only systematic; many of them are also universal.
2. Not all errors are universal. Some errors are common only to learners who share the same mother tongue or whose mother tongues manifest the same linguistic property. For example, speakers of Bantu, languages in southern Africa frequently use the preposition 'at' to refer to direction as well as location, producing errors such as:

   We went ***at*** Johannesburg last weekend.

Errors, then, can have different sources. Some errors seem to be universal, reflecting learners' attempts to make the task of learning and using the L2 simpler.

Some examples of universal errors:
   a. **omission.** Means leave out some works or parts of words, For example, they leave out the articles 'a' and 'the' and leave the -s off plural nouns.
   b. **Overgeneralization**. Means using forms that they find easy to learn and process. E.g. The use of 'eated' in place of 'ate' is an example of an **overgeneralization** error.
   c. **transfer errors**. These reflect the learners' attempts to make use of their Ll knowledge.

Error evaluation
1. Some errors can be considered more serious than others because they are more likely to interfere with the intelligibility of what someone says.
2. Some errors, known as **global errors,** violate the overall structure of a sentence
      e.g. *The policeman was in this corner whistle ...*
   This sentence is difficult to understand because the basic structure of the sentence is wrong.
3. Other errors, known as **local errors,** affect only a single constituent in the sentence (for example, the verb) and are, perhaps, less likely to create any processing problems. Most of Jean's errors are of this kind.

Developmental patterns

1. **The** early stages of L2 acquisition
   a. **silent period.**
      i. When learners (especially children) make no attempt to say anything to begin with.
      ii. They are, in fact, learning a lot about the language just through listening to or reading it.
      iii. The silent period may serve as a preparation for subsequent production.
      iv. Some learners talk to themselves in the L2 even when they decline to talk to other people.
   b. Characteristics of early speech:
      Early speech has two particular characteristics:
      1) One is the kind of **formulaic chunks** which we saw in the case studies. Fixed expressions like 'How do you do?', 'I don't know'
      2) The second is **propositional simplification**. Learners find it difficult to speak in full sentences so they frequently leave words out. For example, J wanted the teacher to give him a blue crayon but said only:

   Me no blue. meaning 'I don't have a blue crayon'.

   - **acquisition order**. Do learners acquire the grammatical structures of an L2 in a definite order? For example, do they learn a feature like progressive -ing (as in 'painting') before a feature like past tense -ed (as in painted).
   - **sequence of acquisition** of particular grammatical structures, such as past tense. Do learners learn such structures in a single step or do they proceed through a number of interim stages before they master the target structure?

The order of acquisition
To investigate the order of acquisition, researchers choose a number of grammatical structures to study (for example, progressive *-ing,* auxiliary *be,* and plural -5). They then collect samples of learner language and identify how accurately each feature is used by different learners.
This enables them to arrive at an **accuracy** order. That is, they rank the features according to how accurately each feature is used by the learners.

Some researchers then argue that the accuracy order must be the same as the order of acquisition on the grounds that the more accurately learners are able to use a particular feature the more likely they are to have acquired that feature early.

Sequence of acquisition

When learners acquire a grammatical structure they do so gradually, moving through a series of stages en route to acquiring the native-speaker rule. The acquisition of a particular grammatical structure, therefore, must be seen as a process involving transitional constructions. As an example of this process, let us consider how L2 learners acquire irregular past tense forms (for example, 'ate'}. Learners are likely to pass through the different stages.

stage	Description	Example
1	Learners fail to mark the verb for past time	'eat'
2	Learners begin to produce irregular past tense forms	'ate'
3	Learners overgeneralize the regular past tense form.	'eated'
4	Sometimes learners produce hybrid forms.	'ated'
5	Learners produce correct irregular past tense forms	'ate'