

## **Thirty years Later: A Retrospective Look at the Influence of S.P. Corder's 'The Significance of Learners' Errors.'**

by  
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Thirty years ago S. Pit Corder wrote a brief article which advocated many of the principles which are today basic to Second Language Acquisition research methodology and theory. Prior to Corder (1967) the dominant view of second language learners' errors was that they were the result of interference between their L1 and the target language. This view was in harmony with not only the behaviorist theories of language teaching of the day, which held that learning a new language was a matter of gaining new habits of language, but also with the descriptive/structuralist emphasis then in vogue in linguistics, which favored contrastive analysis. (Pica, 1994, Agar, 1994, Seliger, 1988) These paradigms were shattered by two publications: Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957) and S. Pit. Corder's "The Significance of Learners' Errors," in 1967. Corder's article concretely applied aspects of Chomsky's theory to the analysis of language learning, and at the same time influenced how we have come to view the learner, how we view the way in which a second language is learned, the view of second language acquisition as distinct from first language acquisition. He also introduced the study of learner language or "interlanguage," and laid the theoretical and methodological foundation for "error analysis" (EA).

In the pre-Corder (1976) world, researchers made comparative inventories of languages, under the assumption that the differences between one's L1 and the target language would predict areas of difficulty. Although there is some relationship between the learner's L1 and subsequent development in a particular L2 (Pica 1994), at that time the focus was on the languages and not the learner or the learning process. (Pica, 1994, Seliger 1988, Ellis 1994, Corder 1967). Illustrative of this approach is the following quote from Robert Lado's 1957 work *Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers*,

We will assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his [✓her] native language will be

simple for him [✓her], and those elements that are different will be difficult.  
(as cited in Pica, 1994)

Predictions of difficulty, however did not relate to actual experience in the classroom (Seliger 1988, Corder 1967). The past thirty years of SLA research has shown that the influence of L1 on L2 is much more complex and related to a larger number of factors than was presented by contrastive analysis (Ellis 1994, Pica 1994, Seliger 1988). Today, both contrastive analysis and the notion of transfer are still active, but their focus has radically changed.

Corder (1967) presented a fundamentally different approach -- an approach characterized by a focus on the learner and the learner's language, the defining of a specific method of obtaining evidence of the learner's language acquisition, and a theoretical model of how the learner acquires the new language -- based on analyzing the *systematic* errors that a learner makes. He adopted Chomsky's distinction between performance and competence and applied it to the types of errors which language learners make. Slips of the tongue and other misstatements which all speakers make at random are seen as errors of performance, non-systematic errors. In contrast, other errors are systematic-- they are due to the learner's incomplete grasp of the language -- and these errors, he argued, can tell us about the underlying internal processes that the learner is going through. For Corder, the random, non-systematic errors are referred to as *mistakes*, and tell us nothing. The systematic errors, which are due to the learner's competence, are referred to as *errors*, and are the appropriate area of investigation. For some, this was Corder's major contribution: he defined what should be investigated and what should not be investigated (Seliger, 1988, 18)-- specifically, the competence domain of the learner's language. Ellis states that this was, in effect, the birth of Second Language Acquisition research (SLA),

Whereas CA looked at only the learner's native language and the target language, EA provided a methodology for investigating learner language. For this reason EA constitutes an appropriate starting point for the study of learner language and L2 acquisition. (Ellis, 1994, 48)

Theorists contemporary to Corder had suggested a number of alternative views of aspects of language acquisition, but it was Corder who, in a single article, brought these views together into a coherent argument. What Corder (1976) did by advocating error analysis was to provide a method of looking into the learner's way of acquiring L2. Error analysis provided evidence which refuted the behaviorist views of language learning

(Ellis, 1994), views which Chomsky had effectively refuted by argument in his now famous 1959 "Review of Verbal Behavior" (Lyons 1970).

The shift of focus from languages to the learner's language brought with it an end to the simple assumption that learning L2 required only substituting L2 habits for L1 habits. A deeper issue addressed by Corder (1967) involved whether the processes for acquiring L2 were the same as for L1 -- Corder thought that they were similar. The identity hypothesis, also known as the L2 = L1 hypothesis is an important issue in SLA. Corder has been criticized for his assuming that L1 has great influence on L2 acquisition (Richards, 1974). Corder (1967) does indeed place great influence on L1 in the learning of L2. At the same time, Corder (1967) points out that there are fundamental differences between L1 and L2 acquisition. How can this be? As previously mentioned, Corder (1967) was instrumental in the defeat of the behaviorist approach to language learning. An important part of Corder's argument is in his pointing out differences between L1 and L2 acquisition. These differences were: (1) that learning of L1 is, in most cases, inevitable, but that learning L2 is not inevitable; (2) that L1 is learnt in conjunction with maturation, whereas L2 usually begins after maturation; (3) that L1 learners are acquiring initial speech behavior, but L2 learners already have speech behavior; (4) that motivation for learning L1 and L2 are different. Let's now look at a more recent study which does not support L1 = L2. If we take these four listed differences from Corder, and add to them some differences found elsewhere in Corder's article, and then compare these with those differences Ellis derived from Bley-Vroman (1988) we see that there is little difference between the two lists. However there are two exceptions of note: one is fossilization, which was a concept introduced post-Corder (1967), by Selinker (1972), which was an outgrowth of error analysis; the second concerns motivation, where Corder held a contrary view regarding L1 but a similar view for L2.

However, these are surface distinctions between L1 and L2 learners; a quite different picture emerges if we look at the process differences. Based on the four differences in Corder cited above, he draws the following theoretical positions: (1) that these differences, though obvious, are surface features and do not imply anything about the underlying processes involved in L1 and L2; (2) that there exists a language learning mechanism; (3) that some of the strategies employed in learning L1 are the same as for L2, but that the sequence may be different; (4) that the differences between the success of L1 and L2 learners is in motivation. In looking at Corder's theoretical position we find that he takes a generally L2 = L1 stance. Corder felt that because adult L2 learners already had speech behavior, then they would of course use L1 as benchmark in learning L2. Furthermore, he felt that evidence supported this position,

Although it has been suggested that the strategies of learning a first and second language may be the same, it is nevertheless necessary at this point to posit a distinction between the two... we may certainly take it that the task of the second language learner is a simpler one: that the only hypotheses he [or she] needs to test are: 'Are the systems of the new language the same or different ...and if different, what is their nature?' Evidence for this is that a large number, but by no means all, of his [or her] errors, are related to the systems of his [or her] mother tongue. (Corder, 1967, 26-27)

At the present time, research suggests that the L2 = L1 is at least partially supported (Ellis, 1994). Corder distinguished L2 from L1, but maintained that the underlying processes were similar, a position not unlike the consensus view currently held on L1 transfer in SLA.

Returning to an earlier discussion, the defeat of Behaviorism did not result in the ascent of Cognitivism, rather it was the concept of *acquisition* which was to become the dominant frame of subsequent language research. A discussion of the implications of Cognitivism is beyond the scope of this paper, but Cognitivism here may be thought of as the assumption that a system rules of the user's language has been internalized by cognitive means; whereas acquisition implies that the language has been acquired without an assumption of a specific means. While both terms are in harmony with the Chomskian description of competence, the former is in strict agreement with early Chomskian writings. It is in the distinction made between learning and acquisition that we see some trace of Corder's influence on later SLA research. From this point on, however, we run into trouble because the term acquisition has had a history of confused usage. Ellis defined acquisition in the following manner,

Krashen (1981) uses the term 'acquisition' to refer to the spontaneous and incidental process of rule internalization that results from natural language use, where the learner's attention is focused on meaning rather than form. It contrasts with 'learning.' (Ellis, 1994)

While many points of Stephen Krashen's theory are controversial, they do represent an important thread of discussion within SLA (Pica, 1994, Long, 1992), which is related both directly and indirectly to Corder (1967). Here the example of Krashen is intended as illustrative of the influence of Corder (1976) on later theorists in SLA, and not as the source of Krashen's theories. In Krashen (1982) the distinction between acquisition and learning is considered "the most fundamental of all the hypotheses to be presented here

[in his argument].” Krashen (1982) described acquisition as a subconscious process and learning as a conscious process-- a view which may not be subscribed to by all theorists, even by Corder himself as we shall later see. In contrast to Ellis, Krashen suggests a very different source of the term *acquisition* than himself,

The acquisition-learning distinction is not new with me. Several other scholars have found it useful to posit similar kinds of differences. Bialystock and Frohlich (1972) distinguish “implicit” and “explicit” learning, and Lawler and Selinker (1971) discuss mechanisms that guide “automatic” performance and mechanisms that guide “puzzle and problem solving performance”... Also, Corder (1967) and Widdowson (1977) suggest similar ideas. (Krashen, 1982, notes p. 50)

Later we will return to the influence of Corder on subsequent SLA, particularly of Krashen, but for the moment we shall look at what there was in Corder (1976) that Krashen was referring to. Corder does indeed mention the distinction between acquisition and learning, and references yet another author,

The usefulness of the distinction between acquisition and learning has been emphasized by Lambert (1966) and the possibility that the latter may benefit from a study of the former has been suggested by Carroll (1966). (Corder, 1967, p.20)

Ellis suggests that today, for practical purposes, the terms *learning* and *acquisition* are interchangeable (Ellis, 1994). But it is insightful that at the time of Corder (1967), and in subsequent times, this distinction was important.

The context of Corder’s reference to this distinction between acquisition and learning was within a densely written section which weaves a number of contemporary notions into a general view of how language is acquired. Corder begins this discussion with the distinction between teaching and learning, moves on to a suggestion that some processes involved in acquiring L1 may also be involved in acquiring L2. He then mentions the distinction between acquisition and learning, cited above, and swiftly moves on to differences between L1 and L2 acquisition, noting that these differences do not address the process of learning L1 or L2. He then introduces the notion of an internal language acquisition mechanism, suggests that this mechanism may be accessible to L2 learners and concludes that the principal difference between L1 and L2 learners is motivation. He further concludes that the strategies used in learning L1 and L2 are “substantially the

same,” but notes that the sequence of learning may be different for L1 and L2. This breathtaking tour of contemporary thought represents Corder’s framework in advocating error analysis. The immediate significance was a justification of a theoretical view of language learning and a particular method of investigation. The greater significance was that these concepts were from then on conjoined.

Corder (1967) provided a framework, in effect a general theory, which has had a lasting impact on the field. Corder felt that there was a contemporary movement from “a preoccupation with *teaching* towards a study of *learning*.” Corder made use of contemporary studies [he cites Carroll (1955), Mager (1961) and Ferguson (1966)] which indicated that teacher generated learning sequences were often in conflict with learner-generated learning sequences. Within the framework outlined above, this implied two significant notions: (1) that there was a distinction between learning, as it was commonly conceived at that time, and how language was actually acquired, (2) that there were developmental sequences which learners passed through. Viewed in this way, learning and acquisition imply very different things-- learning was directed from an external source, whereas acquisition pertained to the internal process of the learner. Although Corder (1967) only touches on these topics, it is worth noting that both the distinction between acquisition and learning and the study of developmental sequences were later to become major items of discussion in SLA literature. Corder further noted that there is significant difference between what *input* is available to a language learner and what appears to be the learner’s *intake*-- indicating that the learner has his or her own way of investigating, or of “discovering” the language to be learned. He conceived of a *built-in syllabus*, like a language acquisition device, that the learner uses to acquire a language.

We shall never improve our ability to create such favourable conditions until we learn more about the way a learner learns and what his built-in syllabus is. (Corder, 1967, 27)

He then argues in favor of a learner-centered syllabus, where instruction would allow, “the learner’s innate strategies to dictate our practice and determine our syllabus...” These notions of learner-centeredness, the relationship between L1 and L2, developmental sequences, and learner language may not have been original to Corder, but his fusing them into a coherent framework was. As Seliger put it,

...this article changed the way researchers in SLA viewed learners and the language they produced. Although there may be some debate about the

relative importance of Chomsky's and Corder's milestones, there is no denying their impact on our thinking up to now and probably into the foreseeable future. (Seliger, 1988,17)

One traceable influence of Corder (1967) on later thinking was Krashen and Terrell's *The Natural Approach* (1983) and other works by Krashen. Controversial as some of Krashen's views are, it is illustrative of how aspects of Corder (1967) have been developed theoretically at a later time in Krashen's work. *The Natural Approach* (1983) and Krashen (1982) are characterized by a number of items consistent with the Corder (1967) frame: learner-centered orientation, developmental sequences, learner language, the learning-acquisition distinction and other items; in truth, a similar assertion could be made with many other theorists as well. To be sure, Krashen cites authorities other than Corder in his writings, but a comparative reading reveals a shared ideological frame. Of particular note is Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), wherein the affective filter constricts input, which is then processed through a "language acquisition device" and results in "acquired competence." Krashen's hypothesis shares a striking resemblance to Corder's distinction between input and learner intake, his "built-in syllabus", his hypothesis of an innate language acquisition mechanism and his "transitional competence." This comparison does not claim that they are saying the same thing, rather it suggests that aspects of Corder (1967) have been drawn on or have been inherited due to the influence of his general theory. Teresa Pica has pointed out a similar relationship between Corder (1967) and Krashen and Terrell's theory as it appears in *The Natural Approach* (1983) ,

In advancing his case for the primacy of comprehension to L2 learning and, at times, arguing for its sufficiency in the learning process, Krashen has drawn from Corder's (1967) distinction between L2 input to learners and their actual intake, arguing that L2 input must be comprehended if it is to become intake to assist the acquisition process. (Pica, 1994)

Clearly Krashen has utilized Corder's distinction to arrive at a very different implication from the original, yet these connections do serve to illustrate the impact of less obvious aspects of Corder (1967) on later work in SLA. An illustration similar to the foregoing might be made with a number of other theorists.

It is paradoxical that so influential a work as Corder (1967) should have as its central thesis a method of investigation which is now no longer the preferred method of many researchers (Ellis, 1994). Corder himself held great hope that a systematic

application of error analysis would reveal details of the process of how learners learn. Subsequent error analysis studies, however, revealed a tremendous complexity that raised many methodological problems as well as theoretical issues (Ellis, 1994). Corder's distinction between mistakes and errors became in practice difficult to classify. Ellis also points out that the focus on errors gives an incomplete picture, the method does not reveal avoidance strategies which may distort the analysis, and that in practice most of the studies were cross-sectional resulting in little information on learning over time. That most of the error analysis studies were cross-sectional is ironic when we consider the original argument of Corder (1976). The overarching concern of Corder (1967) is with how the learner learns-- he argued that this can only be determined by (1) a focus on the learner's language, (2) a systematic study of errors (3) by a longitudinal study of those errors. After giving an example of how a L1 learner tests hypotheses about the language, Corder states, "Only a longitudinal study of the child's development could answer such a question." (Corder, 1967, p.26) The need for longitudinal studies, though mentioned only once, is an early insight into a problem which affects other areas of SLA research as well (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Ellis, in referring to EA cross-sectional studies, points to one longitudinal EA study which showed that some errors persist over time,

As a result [of cross-sectional studies], EA has not proved very effective in helping us understand how learners develop a knowledge of an L2 over time. This weakness is, again, not a necessary one. EA can be used in longitudinal studies of how learners' errors change from one stage to another, can shed light on the process of L2 acquisition. (Ellis, 1994, 68).

It is to "shed light on the process of L2 acquisition" that Corder had envisioned EA. Today error analysis "continues to be used as a means of investigating learner language with due attention paid to non-errors as well as to errors" (Ellis, 1994, 68) and for specific research questions (Ellis, 1994, 20), notably in interlanguage pragmatics.

Although error analysis has lost some influence, related parts of Corder's argument, most notably identifying of competence as the object of SLA study and the study of learner language, have remained as fundamental views of SLA to the present. Indeed, it is now commonly accepted that it is learner competence which is the proper field of SLA; or to quote Rod Ellis, "The goal of SLA is the description and explanation of the learner's linguistic or communicative competence." (Ellis, 1994, 15) Corder argued that the competence revealed by the learner was a "transitional competence." This transitional competence was to be responded to by Nemser's "approximative systems" in 1971 and

then “interlanguage” by Selinker, in 1972. In 1971 Corder used the term “idiosyncratic dialects,” which, when applied to second language, was not unlike interlanguage. By 1981 Corder himself was using the term “interlanguage” (Seliger, 1988, Corder, 1981), a concept of common usage in SLA today. Each of these terminologies listed above referred to a particular perspective on learner language, but in general differed only slightly (Seliger, 1988).

## Conclusion

My purpose here has not been a defense of the positions taken in Corder (1967), but to point to its early insights and to discuss or illustrate their importance. In general, Corder (1967) provided an initial general theory which has had a lasting influence on the field of SLA. Specifically, I have emphasized six components of this work and discussed the importance of each in terms of either the historic development of SLA or the theoretical development of SLA. I will now briefly recapitulate those six components. Corder advocated that the focus of investigation and teaching should be the learner. Secondly, he placed competence as the object of SLA investigation. He raised the distinction between L1 and L2 acquisition, and pointed to the similarities of underlying processes. He advocated that the learner determines how the learning of a language will proceed, both in terms of intake and the sequence. He introduced error analysis. Finally, Corder introduced the study of learner language. Within this context I have also noted a number of distinctions made by Corder, particularly between learning and acquisition. In treating each of these components I have emphasized Corder’s impact on the development of SLA, and only made passing reference to numerous other items, such as references to longitudinal studies and motivation, which may have been insightful in themselves.

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