**Techniques and Procedures for Doing Error Analysis**

**Data-collecting Procedures**

There are basicalJy two types of data-collecting procedures:

**(a) spontaneous**, and

**(b) elicited**, each of which can be used for both spoken and written data. These are presented below.

**Spontaneous procedures**

For collecting spontaneous (unplanned) data from spoken language,

unmonitored conversation and interview are used, and for collecting

spontaneous data from written language **free composition and**

**examination papers** can be used where the learner's attention is

focused on the content rather the form of what he wants to say or

write. For collecting natural spontaneous data a variety of topics

should be used. These include personal information, future plans,

religious, social, and political issues, and the like. A spontaneous

conversation calls for considerable flexibility in what the learner talks

about. As Domyei (20 1 0) says,

" ... the intention is to create a relaxed atmosphere in which the respondent may reveal more than he/she would in formal contexts" (p.l35-6). However, certain types of questions tend to naturally elicit conversation more readily than others. Following are some types of questions that can help obtain free conversational data.

1. Questions that must be answered by conversation rather than

yes-no answers, such as questions that elicit narratives or

descriptive accounts, e.g., *Tell me how you spent your*

*summer holiday.*

2. Questions about the learner's interests and hobbies. Here the

researcher can ask general questions, such as: *What's your*

*hobby? How do you spend your spare time?,* or alternatively

he may start with a yes-no question and then if the answer is

positive he may ask the learner to elaborate on the subject.

An example of this would be:

Researcher: Do you play football?

Learner: Yes.

Researcher: How often?

Leamer: Once a week.

Researcher: I don't know much about football. Could you

tell me how it is played and what the rules of the game are?

Since such questions relate to the learner's interests and

hobbies they can elicit long and animated accounts.

Asking the learner to describe one of his favorite television

programs would be another example of specific questions in

this respect.

3. Questions about the learner's future plans and aspirations,

e.g., *What are you planning to do after you are finished with*

*your studies?*

**Elicited Procedures**

Some of the most common types of elicited procedures are presented

below.

***Translation***

Since some speakers are *reflective* and *reserved* (Palladino, Poli &

Galoriecle, 1997; Brown, 2000) and they use only what they are sure

that they know in speaking the target language, we cannot easily

compare the errors made by different speakers. For this reason,

controlling the elicitation of specific grammatical constructions from

foreign speakers of English is extremely difficult. In order to

overcome this methodological problem, Corder (1974) has suggested

an elicitation procedure which requires direct translation from the

native language to the target language. Although it may be argued that

a translation test may encourage mother tongue influence, it has

proven successful as an elicitation method in studies conducted at

Edinburgh and elsewhere {Taylor, 1975).

The translation technique has several advantages. First of all, it

forces the subject to attempt to produce the structure under

investigation. Secondly, it assures the researcher that the subject

understands the semantics of the structure he is required to produce.

Moreover, by forcing a subject to produce a structure which has not

been completely mastered, the researcher can gain insights into how

the subject understands the language to operate and how he/she

organizes new syntactic constructions in his/her interlanguage.

Translation tests are of two kinds: (a) *oral,* and (b) *written.* In oral

translation, the subjects hear sentences in their native language and

are asked to write the translation of each sentence in the target

language. In written translation, on the other hand, the subjects are

required to translate either individual sentences or a reading passage

containing the structures to be investigated. Oral translation has an

advantage over the written one in that the use of immediate translation

in the former requires an immediate frrst impression response and also

limits the time the subjects have to reflect on the problem. The

responses in both versions should be in writing since a written

response is easier to evaluate than an oral one.

***Multiple-Choice Test***

Traditionally, a multiple-choice item consists of an incomplete

sentence followed by three or more choices, one of which is the

correct response and the others are distracters. It is proposed here,

however, that certain modifications should be made in a multiplechoice

technique which is used for eliciting data from secondlanguage

learners. That is, it must differ from the conventional

multiple-choice tests in two respects, as follows.

( l) It should be free from the restrictions usually intrinsic in the latter,

namely the assumption by the test constructor that one, and only

one, choice is correct. In the multiple-choice technique which is

used for error analysis purposes, the subjects should be given the

opportunity to provide their own responses (in a blank choice

designed specifically for this purpose) besides the ones included in

the alternatives. This is based on the assumption that the subjects'

interlanguage grammar can generate structures which the

researcher might not have been aware of.

(2) The distracters should be chosen from the common errors of the

subjects, if these are available.

**Methodology for the Identification and Interpretation of**

**Errors**

One of the common difficulties in understanding the linguistic

systems of language learners is the fact that such systems cannot be

directly observed. They must be inferred by means of analyzing

production and comprehension data. What makes the task even more

difficult is the unstable and changing nature of learners' systems. That

is, when new information flows in it causes the existing structures of

the interlanguage to be revised. Thus, in undertaking the task of

performance analysis, the teacher and researcher are expected to infer

order and logic in this unstable and variable system.

According to Ellis (1997), the initial step for the analysis of errors

requires the *selection* of a corpus of language followed by the

*identification* of errors. The errors are then *classified.* The next step,

after giving a grammatical analysis of each error, demands an

*explanation* of different types of errors.

Corder's (1973) views on data collection and analysis are

summarized below. Corder maintains that the analysis of collected

data involves several stages. The frrst stage in the technical process of

describing the linguistic nature of errors is to detect and identify them.

The difficulty in doing this lies in the fact that what looks or sounds a

perfectly acceptable sentence may, nevertheless, contain errors. Of

course, in many cases the sentence is not acceptable, i.e., the native

speakers would not accept it as grammatical and then we know that it

IS erroneous. Such utterances, which are unquestionably

ungrammatical at the sentence level, are called overtly erroneous.

Those which are erroneous, but not overtly so, are called covertly

erroneous: sentences which are grammatically *well-formed* at the

sentence level, but they are not interpretable in the context in which

they occur. For example, ' Fine, thanks' is grammatical and correct at

the sentence level, but not when it is used in answer to 'Who are

you?'.

In general, it is easier to detect productive errors, i.e., errors which

occur in the speech or writing of second language learners as opposed

to errors in the receptive skills: reading and listening comprehension.

This is because productive linguistic behavior is easily recordable;

whereas, receptive behavior is not. The hearer does not always

demonstrate unambiguously that he has understood fully what we say.

ln this case, the researcher or teacher should ask the learner further

questions to check his comprehension. The use of the mother tongue is

also recommended here.

The next step in the linguistic analysis of the collected data is to

interpret what the learner has intended to say and to reconstruct his

sentence in the target language. There are basically two types of

interpretations: ***(a) authoritative, and (b) plausible.***

If we cannot interpret and describe a learner's errors and if we have

access to the Ieamer we can ask him to express his intention in his

mother tongue, and then translate his sentence into the target

language. This is called an authoritative interpretation and an

authoritative reconstruction of his sentence in an acceptable form.

Also when we can tell with certainty that the Ieamer's production of

the target language is erroneous our statement is authoritative.

However, when the Ieamer is not available we have to do the best we

can to infer what he intended to say from his utterance, its context and

whatever we know about his knowledge of the target language. This is

called a plausible interpretation and the corresponding reconstruction

is only a plausible reconstruction.

In some cases, the Ieamer's utterance might be ambiguous, i.e.,

more than one plausible interpretation is possible. This obviously

presents a problem of interpretation and linguistic description. Corder

suggests that such ambiguous utterances should be set aside.

However, I believe that some ambiguous utterances can be clarified

through making reference to the learner's mother tongue, if known to

the researcher, since a good number of errors are typically based on

the construction of the learner's mother tongue. Such errors always

appear ambiguous to a researcher who does not know the native

language of the learner.

In any case, whether our interpretation is authoritative or merely

plausible, we finish up with an erroneous utterance paired with a

reconstruction of it in the target language. These paired sentences

constitute the data for error analysis. The following figure, proposed

by Corder ( 1971 ), can serve as a guide for the identification and

interpretation of the data for error analysis.



**Step-by-Step Guide for Identifying and Interpreting Errors**

1. **Step A: Is the sentence well-formed in terms of the grammar of the target language (TL)?**
	* **What it means**: Look at the learner’s sentence and check if it follows the basic grammar rules of the target language (e.g., English).
	* **Example**: If the learner says, *“She go to school every day,”* it’s not well-formed because in English we need *“goes”* instead of *“go”* after *“she.”*
	* **Next Step**:
		+ If **yes** (the sentence is grammatically correct), go to **Step B**.
		+ If **no** (the sentence is not grammatically correct), label it as **overtly idiosyncratic** (meaning the error is obvious) and go to **Step C**.
2. **Step B: Does the normal interpretation of the sentence make sense in the context?**
	* **What it means**: Check if the sentence is logical and understandable in the specific context, even if it looks grammatically correct.
	* **Example**: Suppose the learner says, *“Fine, thanks”* in response to *“Who are you?”* Grammatically, this sentence is fine, but it doesn’t make sense in this context.
	* **Next Step**:
		+ If **yes** (the sentence makes sense), the sentence is **not idiosyncratic** (it has no error), so you don’t need to analyze it further (exit as **OUT 1**).
		+ If **no** (the sentence doesn’t make sense in context), label it as **covertly idiosyncratic** (meaning the error is hidden or harder to spot) and go to **Step C**.
3. **Step C: Can you put a plausible (reasonable) interpretation on the sentence in this context?**
	* **What it means**: Ask if you can guess what the learner was trying to say based on the sentence and the context.
	* **Example**: If a learner writes, *“I very like this food,”* it’s not standard English, but you might guess they mean *“I really like this food.”*
	* **Next Step**:
		+ If **yes** (you can make a reasonable guess), go to **Step D**.
		+ If **no** (you can’t guess the meaning), go to **Step F**.
4. **Step D: Make a well-formed reconstruction of the sentence in the target context.**
	* **What it means**: Rewrite the sentence in correct English to represent what the learner probably intended to say.
	* **Example**: For *“I very like this food,”* the well-formed reconstruction would be *“I really like this food.”*
	* **Next Step**: After reconstructing, go to **Step E**.
5. **Step E: Compare the reconstructed sentence with the original idiosyncratic sentence.**
	* **What it means**: Look at the differences between the learner’s original sentence and your reconstructed (corrected) version. Try to understand why the learner made this error.
	* **Example**: Compare *“I very like this food”* with *“I really like this food.”* You might notice that in some languages, *“very”* can be used this way, so the learner may be transferring rules from their native language.
	* **Next Step**: After this comparison, you can exit this process as **OUT 2** since you have analyzed the error.
6. **Step F: Is the mother tongue of the learner known?**
	* **What it means**: Do you know what the learner’s first language (L1) is? This information can help understand certain types of errors.
	* **Next Step**:
		+ If **yes** (you know the learner’s native language), go to **Step G**.
		+ If **no** (you don’t know the learner’s native language), then you may need to hold the sentence in store as **OUT 3** because it’s hard to analyze further without this information.
7. **Step G: Translate the learner’s sentence literally into L1. Can you get a plausible interpretation in context?**
	* **What it means**: Translate the learner’s sentence word-for-word into their native language to see if it makes more sense that way. This might reveal what they were trying to say.
	* **Example**: If an Arabic-speaking learner says, *“I very like this food,”* translating it literally into Arabic might show that *“very like”* is a direct translation from a similar structure in Arabic.
	* **Next Step**:
		+ If **yes** (the translation helps you understand), go to **Step H**.
		+ If **no** (the translation still doesn’t clarify it), you may need to hold the sentence in store as **OUT 3**.
8. **Step H: Translate the sentence back into the target language to provide a reconstructed sentence.**
	* **What it means**: Use the insights you gained from the learner’s native language to create a corrected version in English.
	* **Example**: From translating *“I very like this food”* into Arabic, you might realize they mean *“I really like this food.”* So, you write this as the corrected sentence.
	* **Outcome**: Now you have a final reconstructed sentence that shows what the learner intended, and you can use it to understand the error better.

**Summary of the Process**

1. **Check if the sentence is grammatically correct and makes sense in context** (Steps A and B).
2. **If the sentence has an obvious or hidden error, try to interpret what the learner meant and correct it** (Steps C, D, and E).
3. **If the error is too ambiguous, use the learner’s native language to help understand and reconstruct the sentence** (Steps F, G, H).

**Study Questions and Exercises**

**1. What are the two main types of data-collecting procedures?**

The two main types of data-collecting procedures are **spontaneous procedures** and **elicited procedures**. These can be used for both spoken and written data.

1. **What are the common procedures for collecting spontaneous data from written language?**

Common procedures for collecting spontaneous data from written language include:

* **Free composition**: Allowing learners to write freely on a topic of their choice.
* **Examination papers**: Collecting written responses in an assessment context where learners focus on content rather than form.
1. **What are some of the common topics used for collecting natural spontaneous data?**

Common topics for collecting natural spontaneous data include:

* Personal information and experiences.
* Future plans and aspirations.
* Religious, social, and political issues.
* Hobbies and interests.
1. **Why can't we easily compare errors made by different learners?**

We cannot easily compare errors made by different learners because:

* Each learner has a unique linguistic background and proficiency level, which influences the types of errors they make.
* Errors can vary widely in nature and frequency, making it difficult to establish consistent criteria for comparison.
* Contextual factors, such as the topics discussed and individual learner experiences, also affect error production.
1. **What are the advantages of the translation technique?**

The advantages of the translation technique include:

* It forces learners to produce specific grammatical structures under investigation.
* It ensures that learners understand the semantics of the structures they are required to translate.
* It helps researchers gain insights into learners’ understanding of the language and how they organize new syntactic constructions in their interlanguage.
1. **How are multiple-choice tests used for error analysis purposes different from conventional multiple-choice tests?**

Multiple-choice tests used for error analysis differ from conventional tests in the following ways:

1. They allow subjects to provide their own responses in addition to the given choices, acknowledging that learners may generate structures not anticipated by the researcher.
2. The distracters in error analysis tests are specifically chosen from common errors made by the learners, rather than being arbitrary or unrelated.
3. **What are the differences between authoritative and plausible interpretations of errors?**
* **Authoritative interpretations** are based on clear understanding and certainty about a learner's intent, often confirmed through direct communication with the learner or established linguistic rules. They reconstruct the learner's utterance into an acceptable form.
* **Plausible interpretations** are more speculative and involve inferring what the learner intended based on context, existing knowledge of the target language, and available data. These interpretations may not be definitively correct but offer a reasonable understanding of the learner's intent.
* Part D. Complete the following paragraph using the prompts in
* the box.
* cause
* nature
* classifying
* collecting
* identifying
* evaluating
* describing
* Error Analysis as a procedure used by teachers and researchers
* involves: ........... samples of learner's language, ......... the errors in
* the sample, . . . . . . . . . . . . these errors, .......... them according to their
* ......... and ....... , and .......... their seriousness.

Error Analysis as a procedure used by teachers and researchers involves **collecting** samples of learner's language, **identifying** the errors in the sample, **describing** these errors, **classifying** them according to their **nature** and **cause**, and **evaluating** their seriousness.