

Driving Interlanguage: The Language Development Diary

What is 'interlanguage'?

The best general definition of 'interlanguage' and similar/related concepts is probably to be found in the glossary of Ellis' (monumental) guide to Second Language Acquisition (1994: 710). Ellis describes interlanguage thus:

Selinker (1972) coined the term 'interlanguage' to refer to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both these learner's L1 and the target language. The term has come to be used with different but related meanings: (1) to refer to the series of interlocking systems which characterize acquisition, (2) to refer to the system that is observed at a single stage of development ('an interlanguage'), and (3) to refer to particular L1/L2 combinations (for example, L1 French/L2 English v. L1 Japanese/L2 English). Other terms that refer to the same basic idea are 'approximative system' (Nemser 1971) and 'transitional competence' (Corder 1967).

Looking at learners' L2 production can reveal the current state and characteristics of their interlanguage, though this is more frequently referred to as 'error patterns' and the like. Thinking about L2 production in terms of 'interlanguage' is at once more neutral and more constructive than labeling 'error patterns'. For one, 'interlanguage' seems to refer to a 'work in progress' - a temporary stage somewhere on the way towards native speaker proficiency. It also hints at progressive stages to come, which may still not be perfect, but can give us indications that a learner's proficiency is gradually developing.

Developing Interlanguage through the Process of Noticing

It has been repeatedly and increasingly pointed out that one of the best ways to drive language acquisition and make it accessible in longer term memory is through a variety of processes that begin with language input and move on to language intake, the latter best facilitated through the key process of *noticing*. One of the best ways to facilitate 'noticing' is by *externalizing* what is normally an inherently *internal* system. Students need to see the 'gap' between the way they think the language works and the way it actually works at a target proficiency level, but they also need to have access to processes that allow them to take control of their own interlanguage system and overtly drive it closer to the target language. In terms of classroom instruction, teachers also need to have access to examples of their learners' interlanguages. This allows teachers to target lessons to particular types of language, and to notice consistently appearing patterns in each learner's ongoing acquisition process. While noticing needs to focus on particular structures at the sentence level, it would appear that sentence production still needs to fit within an overall communicative act of some sort. This can help to explain why students can get isolated grammar questions correct but produce structures quite different when they are engaged in spoken or written communication in a more extended sense.

Many teachers may already believe that they advocate and go about the process of facilitating 'noticing' in students through corrective feedback of various kinds. But what we need to bear in mind is that standard methods of 'correcting' can have a lesser or greater effect. Marking errors by crossing words out and writing corrections above them is likely to encourage 'noticing' in a very temporary and superficial sense. Interrupting students while they are speaking to make an overt correction may simply help students to 'notice' that they appear to be making a lot of mistakes, as well as make the general act of communicating something appear to be more drawn-out and stressful than it is worth. In the above two examples of 'error-correction', there are also few opportunities for students to notice recurring patterns in their production that constitute a significant difference between what they *think* is right and what *is* right, not just in terms of 'the sentence of the moment', but across a range of language forms that they say or write.



Language Development Diaries - Overview and How to Apply

Language Development diaries are one method of: (1) externalizing interlanguage and holding it in ‘still time’ so that it can be noticed and analyzed more carefully, (2) clearly illustrating the ‘gap’ between a learner’s current proficiency and the target language itself in a non-stressful manner, (3) facilitating a building process that allows learners to experiment with their interlanguage and make fresh hypotheses about how the target language operates, (4) removing specific kinds of language from general communicative acts so that attention can be called to form in isolation - not the overall ‘quality’ of a student’s communicative production, and (5) creating a student-generated record and reference that allows teachers to locate recurring patterns in students’ interlanguage, but also to help students refer back to previous ‘mistakes’ to assist them in formulating fresh hypotheses about new or related pieces of interlanguage that vary from the target language.

While Language Development Diaries can be used across the entire curriculum (including for example the sorts of language the students produce in grammar tests), they are most recommended for use in conjunction with natural communicative acts in speaking or writing (for example, topical group conversations, essays or story writing). Learners’ true interlanguage emerges when they are dedicating the least amount of their attentional energies to analyzing language forms, as this is the sort of language that is ‘instinctively’ available and located in long term memory. It is also recommended that the diaries not be used to detail every single ‘error’ the students make in their production, as at lower levels of proficiency this could make for a very de-motivating list indeed! As a guide, start by locating the language that deviates the most from standard target models, and try not to allocate more than 5-10 pieces of language at a time. To make the process most effective, the teacher can try to notice and list several examples of production that have the same (or similar) function and grammatical form. In building one of the examples up into a form that is closer to the target language and then noticing a ‘rule’ that applies to other examples as well, students may be able to ‘fix’ several parts of their production in one go and are more likely to ‘notice’ the new rule or characteristic in a general sense.

In terms of gathering production, it is recommended that written essays and taped conversations be utilized. The teacher then points out which aspects of the student’s speaking or writing were ‘very different to the way English-speaking people’ speak or write. The student then writes this ‘deviation’ in the left hand side of the double box featured in the Language Development diary. From there, they attempt to change the language they produced into something closer to the target language norm by re-writing the sentence or utterance in the right hand section of the entry. It is worth giving them 4-5 chances to achieve this on their own, the teacher simply indicating whether the changing sentence is improving or not. After 4-5 attempts, the teacher may like to provide the target language norm. Once the right hand adaptation is the same as (or satisfactorily similar to) a target language norm, the teacher signs the entry to verify that the language is ‘more like it should be!’ In the case of ‘silly’ seeming or careless mistakes in production, students are likely to be able to correct it relatively quickly, but for more serious deviations the students may be required to really work at it - in both cases noticing is being facilitated in a positive way.

The example below shows how a student has located a ‘deviation’ in their production and found their way to a more acceptable variation in terms of a target language norm:

DATE:	Teacher's Signature:
<p>This is what I wrote/said...</p> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;">  <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;"> <p>My is yesterday is play</p> <p>the basket my friends.</p> </div> </div>	<p>This is what I SHOULD write or say!</p> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;">  <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;"> <p>Yesterday, I played</p> <p>basketball with my friends.</p> </div> </div>

Group Work and Further Application

Once students have become accustomed to using the Language Development Diary in a general sense, and in classes where collaborative group work is possible and positive, students can be encouraged to fix their mistakes in groups. Alternatively, they can attempt to quiz each other, either by challenging a peer to come up with a correction for a mistake they noticed in their own production, or looking at a partner's diary and testing to see whether the other student can remember the correct form they came to and listed down.

The diary also makes for a handy revision tool. Either as homework or in class, students can be encouraged to read over the entries in their diaries and to try and remember the correct forms they came up with.

Given that the diary entries have been taken from natural communication in spoken or written form, it is important to attempt to 'reinsert' the worked on forms back into the same style of production. This could involve a re-writing of a story or an essay first with the diary on-hand to make explicit corrections and then later without the diary to see just how much of the language has become more available to long term memory. In terms of speaking, it could involve a reintroduction of the original topic or the introduction of a new but related topic that is likely to facilitate application of certain parts of the language worked on in the Language Development Diary. Going over the language produced a second time may see the students writing the same or similar deviations into their diary again, but this only encourages more rapid and more effective noticing, as well as a (possibly) faster correction time.

For teachers with computer skills, the Language Development Diary works extremely well in application to email communication. By copying and pasting a student's email into a word processing program, the teacher can underline and/or footnote the sections he/she would like the student to attempt to work on. This file can be printed and handed to the student, or sent back to them in another email or as an attachment (the former course is recommended here, as it removes the 'language work' from the actual medium of 'communication' - in this case being to exchange messages via email). The student then enters the underlined/footnoted sections into their language diary and gets to work on them. From there, it would be up to the teacher to try and spot and see whether the language appearing in subsequent emails is drawing closer to target language norms.