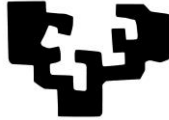eman ta zabal zazu

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Analysis of the Linguistic Competence of English Language 1

Error Analysis: a case study with intermediate learners of English

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0. Abstract

Error Analysis emerged following the traces of Contrastive linguistics, which has been a recurrent approach for research on Second Language Learning in the last century. Errors had been considered a negative response to language acquisition until the development of Error Analysis in the 60s. This perspective would state that there is a contrastive side in second language learning, and innovatively suggest that committing errors does not mean a failure in the learning process, but that it is a positive indicator of the natural steps of language learning. By using Error Analysis approach, the present study aimed at examining a collected corpus of 25 intermediate level essays written in English by students at the University of the Basque Country. The analysis centred on identifying and labelling all lexical and grammatical error occurrences, and determining whether the errors found had an L1 influence or not. The results showed, first, that in the majority of the cases the source of the error was the L2 itself, although, apparently, L1 played a significant role in many cases too, as other studies have previously stated on research with Spanish as L1. Secondly, grammatical errors seemed to occur more frequently than lexical ones, being especially recurrent those related to syntax and verb morphology. Among lexical errors, distortions were the most common errors found in the essays. The analysis of the findings resulted in the suggestion of several didactic implications, which are designed for the improvement of second language learning and teaching. These implications include giving importance to teaching specifically lexis, grammar and chunks; highlighting error feedback, self-edition and needs analysis; and finally taking into consideration gravity of errors and the impact that word processors may have in the process of writing. To conclude, some limitations of the study have been outlined, in order to give guidance on how future research could improve the current research area.

Keywords: error analysis, English as a second language, essays, intermediate, didactic implications.

1. Introduction

Learning English as a second language is becoming more and more important nowadays, especially after WWII, when English became a Lingua Franca. Globalization is bringing effects that are notoriously advantageous for English speakers, as it has become the language of international communication and the preferred language of the academic community. Therefore, Second Language Teaching still continues trying to find new trends and methods to present the best ways to state English in academic settings.

This paper can contribute to the field by showing in quantitative terms what the errors of speakers of Spanish are when producing written texts in English. The approach followed for that purpose is that of Error Analysis, which was born in the 60s as an improvement of Contrastive Linguistics, but differing in certain aspects. Although many researchers have published on second language teaching, there is still not that much information about Error Analysis in quantitative and qualitative research with Spanish as a L1.

This paper is organized in three main sections below: firstly, the aims of the study will be presented as well as a review on previous research. Then, the methodology and results of the data will be analysed and finally some pedagogical implications will be presented.

2. Aims of the Study

The overall aim of this study is to analyse the errors in English written production by non-native speakers of English by using EA procedures. The paper will try to offer useful information for future research and give pedagogical advice to teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL).

More specifically, this research will try to complete the following purposes:

1. To present detailed information about a collected corpus of essays to find learner's errors.
2. To classify those occurrences according to two different taxonomies: the first one will be a dichotomy of interlingual and intralingual errors aimed to

identifying the source, and the second one a subcategorization of errors based on lexical and grammatical rules.

3. To offer quantitative results of frequency of error occurrences made by the participants, and reach some general conclusions.

4. To offer didactic implications and advice.

3. Literature Review

The study of second language learning has changed greatly in the last decades, from a behaviouristic view of learning a language through mainly repetition and discipline, towards a way of analysing language learning that recognizes errors as natural steps in the process of language learning. In fact, when behaviourism was the main trend, errors were considered to be extremely negative because they represented a failure of learning, and these types of approaches, such as Contrastive Analysis (CA), tried to correct the learning process by repetitions of good habits and discouragements of errors. In order to understand Error Analysis (EA) and its sources, it is important to know the precedents of the study of second language learning.

3.1. Contrastive Analysis

Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) were the first precursors of CA. This approach would be put into practice by systematically comparing two languages; in fact, CA methodology focuses on finding the similarities and differences between the native and the Target Language (TL) of a learner. Fries (1945) stated that the most efficient language learning materials would be achieved by comparing the mother tongue and the language to be learned. Similarly, Lado (1957) contributed to this idea by saying that the more similar the elements in both languages are, the simpler they will be for the learner to acquire. The belief of CA theorists is, as summarized by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), that "where two languages were similar, positive transfer would occur; where they were different, negative transfer, or interference, would result" (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, p.52). CA was seen at that time as a very suitable answer to how TLs were learned. However, later on some scholars appeared to be discontent about the fact that by using CA errors were considered failures in the learning process, which needed to be corrected. Moreover, according to Kim (2001), by the early 70's CA lost importance

because its predictions of learner errors were inaccurate or uninformative; that is, errors would not occur where CA theorists had predicted.

3.2. Interlanguage and Error Analysis

When Chomsky started publishing some new concepts about innateness of language ability in humans and Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 1965), second language learning began to be studied from different perspectives. This new impulse could have provoked the birth of approaches such as Error Analysis and Interlanguage, which became major trends in the following decades. Some authors also rejected CA stating that language is not necessarily based on transference of knowledge from one language to another, but on an innate knowledge about language to human beings.

This is how Selinker (1972) proposed the term Interlanguage to talk about a stage in the learning process of a TL which can be analysed to understand the system that the learner is using, and also to measure their competence (always keeping in mind its idiosyncrasy). Interlanguage would thus be a descriptive methodology and would try to avoid making comparisons with the L1, which was its main distinctive feature in comparison with CA.

In the 60's and 70's, Corder (1967) developed a new way of approaching second language acquisition; the so-called Error Analysis. This methodology is now a more rationalistic way of analysing language teaching. By implementing EA, learners' errors of a learner could be described without referring to their L1. According to Selinker (1992), Corder made two highly significant contributions to our field of study: first, that the errors of a learner, whether adult or child, are not random, but systematic; and second, that errors are not "negative" or "interfering" with learning a TL, but a positive necessary factor, indicative of testing hypotheses (p. 151). These hypotheses about the nature of a language need to be tested by the learner: They have to ask themselves if the systems of the new language are same or different from those of the language they know. If different, what is then their nature? (Corder, 1981). Another interesting point by Corder is the distinction he made between errors and mistakes, being the first ones understood as systematically made by a learner, and the second ones errors of performance (p. 10). He added that errors are significant in three ways: First to the teacher, because they tell them, if they undertake a systematic analysis, how far towards

the goal of the learner has progressed; second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learnt or acquired and the strategies used; and thirdly because they are indispensable to the learner: it is a device they use in order to learn (p. 11).

3.3. Error Analysis with Spanish as a L1

Many studies in EA have highlighted the importance of second language learners' L1. Although making references to a first language when applying EA methodology might seem to be a bit contradictory after what has been previously stated, researchers agree on the fact that very often some sort of transference occurs between the L1 and the TL (interlinguistic errors). In fact, we cannot deny that CA is one of EA's precedents. There is indeed a contrastive side in the study of second language learning, and, in pedagogical terms, identifying interlingual errors in students' second language production shows that some sort of transference from L1 to L2 does happen. This implies that language teaching materials should be adapted to this condition.

Corder himself (1967) recognized that EA has two purposes, the theoretical and the applied one. While the theoretical side aims at understanding how and what a learner acquires when studying a second language, the applied object is to enable the learner to learn more efficiently by using the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes. Thus, mentioning previous studies on EA with students of Spanish as a L1 can be significant for this piece of research.

Among other authors, Castillejos Lopez (2009) used a sample from the ICLE (International Corpus of Learner English) to analyse the errors made by the students with Spanish as their L1, and found that, in average, 41% of the total errors were interlingual against the 21% of the intralingual ones (being the rest classified as concordance errors).
Another study by Flick (1980), retrieved from Ellis (1994), found that the percentage of grammar transference (or interlingual) errors by adult learners of English with Spanish as their L1 was that of 31% (p. 302).

Politzer and Ramirez (1973) analysed oral production in English among children from bilingual and monolingual schools in Mexico. In both cases, they stated that "the

intrusion of Spanish, though certainly not the only cause of error, plays a considerable role" (p. 25).

Bueno et al., in 1992, presented a collection of studies about EA with students of English with Spanish as their L1. In one of the studies, they conclude that the interference of their mother tongue and ignorance of the rules represented 15.94% of the total errors (p. 59).

Moreover, one of the results by Sarrionandia (2009) would confirm the existence of a L1 influence, stating that 56.3% of the lexical errors in her study are classified as interlinguistic, against a 43.6% of intralinguistic ones.

Table 1

Interlingual, intralingual and other errors in previous studies with Spanish as a L1

	Interlinguistic	Intralinguistic	Other types
Castillejos Lopez (2009)	41%	21%	38%
Flick (1980)	31%	-	69%
Bueno et al. (1992)	15.94% (including ignorance of the rules)	-	84.06%
Sarrionandia (2009)	56.3%	43.6%	0%

4. Materials and method

4.1. Materials

Twenty five essays were collected to create the corpus, written by twenty five undergraduate students of the University of Basque Country in 2014-2015 academic course. At the time the participants wrote the essays, they were on their first year of different BA studies and they were asked to write a tell-a-story composition type with a length average of 150 words. Their competence in English at this stage is estimated to be a B1+. The steps followed for the process are those proposed by Corder in 1974: Collection of the data, recognition of errors, classification of errors and explanation of errors.

4.2. Classification of errors

➢ Depending on the source of the error, they can be interlingual or intralingual. Although many authors have proposed subcategorizations of these two types of errors, this paper will keep a simple distinction of interlinguistic and intralinguistic errors, and further classify the lexical and grammatical types in the next section.

(i) **Interlingual** errors are produced due to the mother-tongue influence. There is a transfer of the signifier, the meaning or the grammatical pattern.

(ii) **Intralingual** errors do not have a L1 influence and are produced within the scope of the TL

➢ Errors produced by the ignorance or misapplication of the 'lexico-grammatical' rules of the TL. They are sometimes referred to as text errors (James, 1998).

(i) **Lexical errors**

· Formal errors of lexis. a. Formal misselection: pairs of words that look and sound similar. b. Misformations (these are interlingual): the production of 'words' that are non-existent in the FL. They can be borrowings, coinages or calques. c. Distortions (these are intralingual): they are formed without recourse to L1 resources, and they result from the misapplication of the following processing operations: omission (*int(e)resting*), overinclusion (*din(n)ing room*), misselection (✗*delitouse*✓*delicious*), misordering (✗*littel*✓*little*) and blending (*the* ✗*deepths of the ocean* (depth + deeps))

· Semantic errors in lexis. There are two main types. a. Confusion of sense relations: usage of superonyms for hyponyms (*Capitalism made America* ✗*big*✓*great*), using hyponyms for superonyms (*The* ✗*colonels*✓*officers live in the castle*), using the less apt of two co-hyponyms *(... a decision to* ✗*exterminate*✓*eradicate dialects*) and using the wrong one from a set of near-synonyms *(...a* ✗*regretful*✓*penitent/*✓*contrite criminal or sinner...)*. b. Collocational errors: making use of a word that is not used in a

certain collocation (*A* ✘*vivacious*✔*lively discussion in the House of Lords*),

(ii) **Grammatical errors**

· Morphology errors. They involve a failure to comply with the norm in supplying any part of any instance of the word classes: *aboli*✘*shment* ✔*-ition* is a noun morphology error, ✘*bringed* ✔*brought* is a verb morphology error, *visit me soon*✘*ly* is an adverb morphology error and *a colourfull*✘*er scene* is an adjective morphology error. Other types of errors may include the third person singular –s, plurality, past and perfect tenses, genitive and progressiveness.

· Syntax errors. These errors affect texts larger than the word, namely phrase, clause, sentence and paragraphs. a. Phrase structure errors: For our analysis and for practical reasons, phrase structures will be tripartite: modifier + head + qualifier (MHQ)[I], with subclasses m1, m2, q1, q2 …. Phrase structure errors are those found inside phrases. b. Clause errors: They involve the ways in which phrases operate in clauses. A clause error will be found if the phrase is superfluous, omitted, misordered, misselected and if it is a blend or hybrid. c. Sentence errors: These involve the selection and combination of clauses into larger units (coordination and subordination). d. Intersentence errors or cohesion: The usage of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. Since the usage of conjunctions is not compulsory, this study will point at the most obviously erroneous cases.

5. Results and Analysis

A number of 266 errors have been identified and classified in the 25 essays, which are 177 words long each on average.

5.1. Interlingual and intralingual errors

[I] Traditional linguistics would use phrase types according to word classes: NP, VP, AjP, AvP, PP. James (1998) suggests using MHQ phrase structures because of the problems that may arise from a traditional classification: first, these five types are not discrete entities, NPs can be found inside PPs; second, head-located errors in the phrases would lead to questioning whether these errors have to be classified as morphological or syntactic; and third, modern syntactic theories tend to multiply the number of phrase-types, adding so-called 'functional phrases': Determiner Phrases, Inflectional Phrases…

Previous studies have shown that interlingual errors play a significant role in L2 learners' production. The results of this paper seem to agree in this respect: 39.097% of the errors found on the students' essays can be identified as having a first language influence, that is, they are errors that have probably as their source some aspect (phonology, lexis, semantics, grammar, spelling, syntax…) that can be related to a Spanish-English transference.

Table 2

Occurrences and percentages of interlingual and intralingual errors

Type of error	Number of errors found	%
Interlingual	104	39.097
Intralingual	162	60.902
Total	266	100

Here are some examples of easily identifiable interlingual errors found in the essays:

(1) ✖ "Scientific"

✓ "Scientist"

The student tries wants to refer to the noun, the person who studies physical sciences, but instead uses a word that in English would be the adjective form. This is because in Spanish "scientist" would be translated as *científico*, which in terms of morphology is similar to "scientific".

(2) ✖ "Recepcionist"

✓ "Receptionist"

Here we find a lexical error. The learner misspells the word in a way that resembles the Spanish word *recepcionista*.

Notice that in occurrences (1) and (2) the words containing the error are very similar in form in both languages. However, there are interlingual errors of other types, more related to grammatical rules, as the one in occurrence (3):

(3) ✖ "Small things of *the* life"

✓ "Small things of life"

> The overuse of the article "the" in this context is incorrect in English. The learner makes a direct translation from Spanish *Pequeñas cosas de la vida*, where the definite article is required.

As for intralingual errors, which are after all the majority of them, these two could be mentioned as mere exemplifications:

(4) ✖ "She got *exciting*"

✓ "She got excited"

The student has used the progressive form of the verb instead of the participle. No Spanish influence has been found behind this error, so it can be classified as intralingual.

(5) ✖ "I was *shoked*"

✓ "I was shocked"

Here again, there is no clear influence of another language, the verb has been simply misspelled.

5.2. Lexico-grammatical errors

In this study grammar-type errors have been found predominant, especially those related to syntactic structures and verb morphology. Table 3 below shows all types and their appearances and the percentages in the essays.

Table 3

Occurrences and percentages of lexical and grammatical errors

Type of error	Number of errors found	%
Lexical	94	35.338
a. **Formal misselection**	18	
b. **Misformation**	12	
c. **Distortion**	33	
d. **Confusion of sense relations**	14	
e. **Collocational error**	17	
Grammatical	172	64.661
f. **Noun morphology**	12	
g. **Verb morphology**	50	

h. **Adverb morphology**	0	
i. **Adjective morphology**	9	
j. **Phrase structure error**	57	
k. **Clause error**	34	
l. **Sentence error**	2	
m. **Intersentence error**	8	
Total	266	100

One significant example from each type found in the texts is shown in the next paragraphs.

a. Formal misselection: among lexical errors, formal misselections constitute the second group with most occurrences. They are words that are misused but they have a similar form and pronunciation, and they can be either interlingual or intralingual. Occurrence (6) shows a formal misselection which is intralingual.

(6) ✗ "They took us to the hotel *were*…"

   ✓ "They took us to the hotel where…"

b. Misformation: as stated before, misformations will always have L1 influence. They are non-existent words in English.

(7) ✗ "But, after all that time suffering the *consecuences* of drinking"

   ✓ "But, after all that time suffering the consequences of drinking"

   In occurrence (7) the word used by the student resembles a word in Spanish (*consecuencias*), and that is most likely the reason why *c* has been used instead of *q*.

c. Distortion: Distortions are by far the most common lexical errors. They are always caused by no other language's influence, although it is not always easy to judge the reason behind a misspelled word. In the example below, *n* is overincluded.

(8) ✗ "She saw a *tinny* world…"

   ✓ "She saw a tiny world…"

d. Confusion of sense relations

(9) ✗ "Any of the three boys had important *damages*"

   ✓ "Any of the three boys had important injuries"

In occurrence (9), "injuries" is a more suitable word because it refers to damages to people, to bodies which are alive. The superonym was used instead of the hyponym.

e. Collocational error

(10) ✗ "Just when he saw the *Sun's light*"

    ✓ "Just when he saw the sunlight"

Even though "the sun's light" cannot be coined as wrong in English, it can be considered an error in terms of collocation because there is a more suitable form of saying it; indeed, the term is lexicalized in the word "sunlight".

f. Noun morphology error

(11) ✗ "he took the number of the *women*"

    ✓ "he took the number of the woman"

It is worth mentioning that this is not the only case in which the word "woman" is used in plural when the context requires it to be written in singular. Apparently, it is a recurrent error.

g. Verb morphology error: At least one verb morphology error is found in almost each essay. The case (12) shows a non-existent verb form in English, but other errors include the usage of incorrect tenses such as present instead of past.

(12) ✗ "he *tooked* the car"

    ✓ "he took the car"

h. Adverb morphology error: Very rare errors; none was found in the written corpus. No instances were found where adverbs are formed incorrectly, or other classes are used instead of adverbs. There are cases, however, where adverbial forms are used instead of other appropriate grammatical classes, but they do not belong to this section.

i. Adjective morphology error

(13) ✗ "as *faster* as he could"

    ✓ "as fast as he could"

The student has used the comparative form of the adjective when s/he should not have used it.

j. Phrase structure error: errors in the basic structure of phrases are extremely common, and appear in different ways.

(14) ✗ "Kate looked him properly"

    ✓ "Kate looked at him properly"

(15) ✗ "*It's* true that you had been in England filming a new soap opera?"

✓ "Is it true that you had been to England filming a new soap opera?"

In occurrence (14), the proposition required by the verb is missing. In this case, the error is intralingual. The incorrect usage of proposition is probably one of the most common in the corpus used in this paper. The articles are misused many times as well, as in occurrence (3). In occurrence (15), the student has not applied the rule of changing the order of the elements in the phrase when the sentence has the form of a question.

k. Clause error: clause errors are those in which the whole phrases are used wrongly. Probably the most common clause errors are those in which a noun phrase is missing (16) or overused (17).

(16) ✗ "in his hand had a gun"

✓ "in his hand he had a gun"

(17) ✗ "She had the amazing opportunity of acting in a good film which <u>it</u> could carry her to the top"

✓ "She had the amazing opportunity of acting in a good film which could carry her to the top"

l. Sentence error: Sentence errors are not common at all, perhaps because English language accepts various syntactic combinations without being regarded as erroneous. In (18), however, the need of a relative linker is obvious.

(18) ✗ "They were *a* little *mounsters* had been living there"

✓ "They were *a* little *mounsters* that had been living there"

m. Intersentence error: also called cohesive errors. In example (19), the student has used the word "they" wanting to mean "somebody", because the reference here is unknown (it is probably an error coming from Spanish influence). Therefore, this is a referential error. Another instance of an intersentence error is that of occurrence (20), because the conjunction cannot be used in that context.

(19) ✗ "The doctor said *they* surely mixed a drug in it"

✓ "The doctor said somebody surely mixed a drug in it"

(20) ✗ "*Whereas* he was *lying* in bed, he was trying to remember the scene"

✓ "While he was *lying* in bed, he was trying to remember the scene"

5.3. Analysis of the results

This study has shown that a considerably high amount of the errors are interlingual (39%), which is not an unexpected result as it is in accordance with the studies mentioned above. Interference of the mother tongue does indeed happen and could be indentified in 104 errors among the 25 relatively short essays. Finding four errors related to the students' L1 on each essay in average is a powerful enough reason to consider methods to develop new teaching and studying strategies.

On the other hand, intralingual errors represent almost 61% of the total errors. Although this analysis does not focus on classifying the types errors with L2 source, there have been proposals of taxonomies inside intralingual errors. Richards (1971) addressed four major reasons for intralingual errors, which are overgeneralization, ignorance of the rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized. In overgeneralizations, the learner creates a deviant structure based on their experience of other structures in the TL. Instances of ignorance of the rule restrictions are those in which rules are applied in contexts where they do not apply. Incomplete application of rules means that the occurrence of some structures is deviant enough so that the rule is not developed properly to the extent of producing acceptable utterances. The fourth case of intralingual errors is the hypothesisation of false concepts, and it means that the errors develop from an erroneous comprehension of distinctions in the TL.

During the process of identifying the error source, while some were easily identifiable as being a direct cause of certain lexical and grammatical structures in Spanish (see again occurrence 1), it was not easy to find a link of this type in some cases, and those were treated as intralingual. The writing processes of the students while non-native language production are often too complex to be labelled, and a discussion with the students regarding their own written productions would be necessary for a better understanding of the source of the error.

As far as the lexico-grammatical errors are concerned, the grammatical ones seem to be predominant (64.6%), especially those related to the structure of phrases and verbs. The students had many difficulties at choosing the right verb tenses in their right contexts, mixing for example present and past tenses constantly, and producing inexistent verb forms. They also had many problems at producing correct modifier + head + qualifier structure phrases. Moreover, clause structure errors were also very common. Thus, there

seems to be a problem with the students' understanding of basic syntax in English, as only phrase structure and clause structure types of errors together constitute 91 out of the 266 ones found, which is a considerably high percentage (34.2%). However, only two sentence errors were found, and eight errors related to the cohesion of the essays. That is easily explainable, as only those instances of obvious errors were counted: the usage of conjunctions is not restricted to few rules in English, and the students may have many different possibilities of expressing the same proposition.

Regarding morphology errors, those in the formation of verbs are the most common (50 occurrences), followed by far by noun morphology errors and adjective errors. As mentioned above, there are many instances of incorrect verbs; therefore some emphasis needs to be put to aim at a better performance in grammar in ESL instruction. Apart from verb errors, the other morphological errors do not occur at such a significant level, except perhaps the 12 cases of incorrect usage of nouns.

Lexical errors constitute the 35.33% of the total number of occurrences. The four types in the taxonomy happen in a considerable amount of instances. Distortion leads the list, with 33 errors, followed by formal misselection with 18, then errors in collocation (17), confusions in sense relations (14) and misformations (12). These results mainly suggest that spelling of words in English needs to be highly improved: students seem not to know how to write many words correctly, and interestingly enough, the majority of these occurrences are not due to L1 interference (as distortions are those lexical errors that are intralingual).

6. Didactic Implications

6.1. Didactic use of lexico-grammatical of errors

Writing in English for Non-Native students has often the purpose of achieving enough knowledge to produce effective academic texts, to be prepared to be able to handle high education requirements (i.e. compositions required at university level). Thus, the didactic implications of this paper will focus on giving tips and techniques to improve on this area.

Looking at the errors found in the current study, the need for improvement in the students' lexical and grammatical abilities seems obvious.

Hinkel (2004) highlighted the importance of specific English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction in opposition to only exposing to the TL. In her words, "a large number of extensive and detailed studies carried out since 1990 have demonstrated that mere exposure to L2 vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and formal written text is not the most effective means of attaining academic L2 proficiency" (p. 5).

This assumption has been evidenced by several studies over the last years. For example, when it comes to vocabulary, Laufer's (1994) research showed that teaching L2 vocabulary persistently would lead to an increase of the vocabulary range in writing, which is required for progressing at university-level. That is probably because the range of vocabulary to which a L1 English speaker is exposed is much higher than the amount of vocabulary to which an ESL learner is exposed, and there must be a compensation of some kind.

Therefore, the first didactic implication that can be derived is that more extensive vocabulary teaching sessions in EAP courses would lead to an increase on the students' lexicon. This teaching practice would lead to a better knowledge and usage of the vocabulary items, potentially reducing lexical errors.

As for improvement in grammar, Hinkel (2004) gives a lengthy list of authors who have established in their works that "consistent grammar instruction is important to develop learner language awareness and improvement in the quality of L2 production" (p.13).

A meta-analysis by Norris and Ortega (2000) found that focusing on grammar instruction is much more effective than teaching methodologies that are based on exposure to L2, without explicit teaching, and that the effects on instruction are durable over time. Moreover, according to these researchers, inductive or deductive teaching of L2 would have better results than implicit instruction.

The second didactic implication would therefore be similar to the first one: reinforcement on teaching the usage of grammar in English would help the students perform better when producing written texts. This is especially relevant considering that from all the errors found in this study, 64.6% were related to grammatical incorrectness.

6.2. Proficiency and chunks[II]

It is important for both instructors and students to know that gaining proficiency in L2 is a difficult and very complex process for an adult learner. According to Pica (1994), teaching grammar to ESL students is not focused on giving Non-Native Speakers (NNS) a native-like proficiency. However, correctness in the students' production is indeed crucial for those who assess them in English teaching courses, and therefore these courses should aim at teaching students to speak and write academically avoiding errors and coherently.

According to Hinkel (2004), many studies have shown that learning grammar in contextual lexicalized chunks (or units) and sentence stems such as whole sentences and phrases and recurrent expressions are fundamental to both L1 and L2 learning and use. Wilkins (1972) approved this idea, and went as far as saying that compared to learning discrete elements, chunks can cover in half time what has to be acquired in a whole year of language learning.

The third pedagogical technique that students and instructors could use for language learning is therefore adding more prefabricated lexical units to the teaching material in the course. If we relate this to the piece of research carried out in this paper, in some cases certain collocational and phrase structure errors could be avoided more easily. Additionally, it is likely that learners' writing techniques would greatly improve, and the L2 would be produced more naturally and fluently as students would use prefabricated items that they know for sure to be correct.

6.3. The importance of error feedback

One widely accepted technique for L2 writing improvement is error feedback. Although it is based on correction itself and therefore cannot anticipate the failure (the error has already been done) it can help students learn from their common errors and punctual mistakes to perform better in their next assignments. Studies have confirmed that error

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[II] According to Ellis (1997), collocational chunks consist on memorized phrases or sentences formed by four to ten words. Chunks allow new learners to create new constructions and add them to their word stock.

feedback improves the quality of the students' compositions and that it leads to a 44 per cent improvement in content expression (James, 1998).

A study by Bitchener (2008) demonstrated in low intermediate ESL students that error feedback had a positive and durable effect (two months), that is, students learned to correct effectively the grammatical items that the study focused on. Bitchener reached the following conclusion regarding his own study in comparison with others:

> Compared with the majority of earlier studies that had measured the effectiveness of corrective feedback on text revisions, this study demonstrates its effectiveness on new pieces of writing. The study also found that students who received direct corrective feedback on the targeted features as well as written and oral meta-linguistic explanation (group one) and those who received direct corrective feedback but no meta-linguistic feedback (group three) outperformed the control group (group four) who did not receive corrective feedback. (p. 115).

Overall, as Hinkel (2004) points out, "the educational goal of error correction is to help L2 writers become independent editors of their own text". (p. 48). The fourth didactic implication is then that error feedback should be given preferably in every student assignment corrected by the instructor. That way, students can self-edit their own essays. The next section gives some information and techniques on self-editing that can be taught to students from the beginning of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses.

6.4. Teaching self-edition to instructors and students

Editing texts with errors can begin as homework so that students get used to identifying errors of different types. This is an idea proposed by Hinkel (2004). According to her, the first step would consist on improving noticing skills from texts that are not the students' own and that contain a controlled and limited number of errors. It is likely that students will find entertaining to act themselves as teachers while doing this sort of practical exercises both in class and at home.

After these practical exercises, the actual self-editing with students writings can begin. Again, a modified version of Hinkel's model (2004) will be proposed here, as it is well

structured and seems efficient. The students would write three assignments in total, divided into the following steps:

1. A first draft of the first essay will be handed to the instructor, who will correct all errors of the types that were previously practiced by the students.

2. In the second (final) draft, the instructor will highlight the remaining errors of these types, and then give them corrective feedback.

3. In assignment two, the instructor should correct only some errors and highlight the rest, telling the students to correct the highlighted ones themselves.

4. In the final draft of the second assignment, the instructor should correct only the most complex error occurrences, leaving the responsibility of the rest to the students.

5. In the third assignment, the most basic types of errors will be the students' responsibility, while the complex ones will be highlighted for the students to try to correct them.

Through this method, students will not only correct the mistakes that they might produce that they have not noticed while reviewing their written assignments. They will also at least notice their errors and learn how to correct them properly with their instructor's guidance.

Students may not be able to correct all the errors they produce, and this is expected, because the goal is not to make them proficient in L2 writing. The key to this practice is to make students aware and responsible for their errors.

6.5. Needs analysis

ESL instructors should take into account that each student will have slightly different levels even inside a class that theoretically is formed by, for example, B1 level students. Their proficiency can be different in each area as well (a student's reading skills might be better than their writing speaking skills, for instance), and consequently they will require different learning needs. It is a difficult task to give L2 lessons to a big group of students with different needs; therefore it could be beneficial to do an entry test to each student in order to identify their specific weaknesses. This might orient instructors to

improve their syllabi, if they notice for instance that there is an area in which all students need to improve.

6.6. Gravity of errors

Classifying the errors by using gravity criteria can be helpful in certain didactic contexts. As pointed out by James (1998), "we do not seek to hone the analytical scalpel so as to lay bare the tiniest error, but […] to prevent obsession with trivial errors and give priority to the ones that really matter" (p. 205). However, researchers do not agree on which errors should be more important than others, and therefore there is no definite list to base on when assessing errors depending on their gravity. There are, moreover, different criteria for error gravity assessment, which according to James (1998) are linguistic criteria, frequency, comprehensibility, noticeability and the irritation factor.

For this paper, linguistic criterion is perhaps the most important, as the mainly assessed factor is grammaticality, directly related to the lexico-grammatical taxonomy that has been used here. The problem is, as mentioned above, that Error Gravity (EG) is highly relative, and there is no definite scale for error evaluation that experts agree on.

Burt and Kiparsky (1972) created a dichotomy that distinguished between global and local errors, the former ones affecting the structure of the sentences and local errors affecting one constituent. What James (1998) concluded from this distinction is that all lexical errors will be inherently local, and grammatical ones can be divisible into local and global. Assuming that, as Burt and Kiparsky (1972) argued, lexical and discourse errors are those which have a higher capacity of distorting the message, lexical errors could thus be considered as being graver from a communicatively efficient point of view.

Applying this criterion to the present study, the students committed a greater number of grammatical and therefore less grave errors in their essays as the message is presumably not very distorted. However, further investigation at semantic and pragmatic levels would be required in order to provide reliable evidence to this idea.

6.7. Writing with word processors

With the coming of the computer era, many pieces of writing nowadays are produced by using several word processors, which include systems of correcting or notifying errors and mistakes while writing. There have been plenty of studies assessing the quality of computer-based writing compared to the traditional pen and paper writing. Goldberg et al. (2003), who compared studies that dealt with word-processing effects on students' writing from 1992 to 2002, concludes that "the relationship between computers and quality of writing appears to have strengthened considerably" (p. 19). This fact might be interesting to the current study because all the 25 papers analysed here had been apparently written (or at least, they had been handed in) electronically, on word processors (more specifically, Microsoft Word). According to Goldberg et al. (2003), "when using computers, students also tend to make revisions while producing, rather than after producing, text" (p. 20). It is possible that students' errors found in the current study have been affected by this factor. Moreover, some word processors offer the possibility of instant detection of spelling errors: "Microsoft Office Word 2007 includes a contextual spelling corrector" that attempts to detect and correct real-word errors (Hirst, 2008), and so do the later versions of Microsoft Word. Automatic correction might have affected the students' writing process, in case they had used this tool and the corrector was functioning, and therefore it is worth mentioning for the implications that this may derive.

Therefore, the medium in which written texts are produced can have significant effects on the final output, thus the awareness on this issue could be used beneficially for the student's awareness and the teacher's didactic response.

7. Conclusions

The aims of this study were to find errors in a written corpus collected for the paper, to classify the errors according to their source and type, to present the errors through some occurrences and also quantitatively, and finally to use the results for a future improvement in ESL classrooms.

The results matched previous studies, indicating that influence of L1 is considerably high in L2 written production, although in this study intralingual errors were found to

happen more often than the interlingual ones. As for the taxonomic classification of errors, grammatical errors outnumbered the lexical ones, with phrase structure errors, verb morphology errors, clause errors and lexical distortions on the top of the list. Finally, some didactic implications were derived from this study and they could be summarized as specific vocabulary and grammatical teaching in academic settings, stress on chunks' memorising to aim at a more fluent and expert-like L2 writing, error feedback provided by the teachers as often as possible, insertion of self-edition techniques and finally, if possible, a needs analysis by the teacher previous to the ESL course to anticipate the students' weaknesses. Additionally, some remarks were made regarding gravity of errors and the impact of word processors in writing.

As for the limitations of the study, it could be added that all the written productions were answers to the same question, telling a story, and therefore several linguistic aspects were more recurrent than others. For example, for these types of writings the verb tense past perfect is the most used one, limiting the possibilities for the students of including others such as future tenses, conditionals and present forms among others. Thus, other genres of writing can be used for future research. As far as competence level is concerned, future research can be devoted to analyses on B2 and C1 levels.

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