

AN ERROR ANALYSIS OF PERSISTENT GRAMMATICAL ERRORS CARRIED OVER FROM BEGINNER TO INTERMEDIATE SPANISH

ISABEL MÉNDEZ DE SIFONTES
SOL ROJAS-LIZANA
UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

Abstract. This study investigates persistent grammatical errors carried over from first to second year students of Spanish as a Foreign Language at the University of Queensland in Australia. The corpus consisted of 151 written tests produced by students in first year (first and second semesters), and 44 written tests in second year (first semester only). Data collection was carried out by identifying grammatical errors and classifying them according to linguistic criteria, such as the language area and the grammatical system affected. The analysis was based on an Error Analysis methodology (Corder 1967; Richards 1980; Fernandez 1997) indicating that morphosyntactical errors in the concordance grammatical system are the most frequent grammatical errors in first year students, and that these errors persist by the second year of instruction.

Keywords: *Spanish as a Foreign Language, grammatical errors, Error Analysis, morphosyntactical errors, concordance grammatical system.*

1. Introduction

The analysis of errors in Second and Foreign Language (L2/FL) learners has been playing an important role in L2/FL Pedagogy since the 1950s. Error Analysis (EA) investigates learners' Interlanguage (IL) -- that is, the developing linguistic system that emerges between the learners' L1 (first language) and the L2/FL they are learning (Selinker 1972) --, in search of areas of difficulties in the acquisition of the Target Language (TL), but also in search of evidence of psycholinguistic processes involved in L2/FL learning.

EA has contributed in several ways to the teaching of languages. On the one hand, the identification, classification and description of errors provide teachers and language program developers with informed knowledge of language areas that are more problematic for students, which in turn should set the basis for improving the teaching and learning process in activities, such as syllabus design and gradation, design of teaching and learning resources, tests, remedial teaching and error correction strategies (Richards 1980). On the other hand, learners' errors give account of the state of learners' competence (linguistic knowledge) (Gass and Selinker 2001) informing teachers of what it is that the students still need to learn (Corder 1967). Moreover, an expected result from an error analysis would be an explanation of what causes the errors being investigated, which provides evidence of mental processes taking place when learning an L2/FL (Corder 1967). EA would attempt to explain the origins of errors not only due to L1 interference, but also errors based on psycholinguistic mechanisms and strategies (Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982).

Despite of the benefits of following an EA methodology, some criticism has also been attributed to this approach. First of all, its exclusive focus on what learners do wrong (errors), ignoring what they do right, provides only a limited and negative perspective of the learners' IL (Torijano Perez 2002). Secondly, the lack of precise and comprehensive taxonomies to

describe and explain errors makes researchers confuse the descriptive and explanatory phases of EA. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 141) differentiate both phases by defining description of errors as “the product of language acquisition”, and explanation of errors as “the language acquisition process”. Lastly, it is also said that EA ignores learners’ avoidance strategies¹, and the context in which errors take place (Sossouvi 2009).

EA studies in Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL) have been focused on several areas from the point of view of the treatment of errors in the L2/FL classroom. Nevertheless, all of them share the main objective of contributing to the understanding of the SFL learning process by getting to know how learners learn, what their difficulties are and their origins, and what to do to facilitate the learning process (Fernandez 1997). Some of those studies that were considered for this research are the following: Vazquez (1991), Fernandez (1997), Marchante (2000), Torijano Perez (2002) and Alexopoulou (2005). All of them offer a comprehensive analysis of errors found in SFL learners’ productions, as well as suggestions for implementing pedagogical guidelines aiming at preventing and/or improving learner’s competence.

For the study presented in this paper, a descriptive-quantitative approach based on an Error Analysis methodology was used to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the most frequent grammatical errors of SFL University students during their first year of instruction, and what are their possible causes?

RQ2: What are the persistent grammatical errors of SFL University students carried over from first to second year of instruction?

2. The study

2.1. Corpus and participants

The corpus used in this study was selected from written examinations produced by SFL students at the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies (SLCCS) at the University of Queensland (UQ), Australia in the year 2008. The Spanish program at UQ started in 1992 and at present, it offers a range of thirteen courses comprising the areas of language and culture, for undergraduate studies, as well as postgraduate at Honours, Masters and PhD level.

The textbook used during the first two years of instruction is *Dos mundos* by Terrell, Andrade, Egasse and Muñoz (2006), which is based on Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell’s Natural Approach to language instruction that basically focuses on communication as its primary goal (Krashen and Terrell 1988). Although *Dos mundos* focuses on developing learners’ communicative competence, explicit grammar instruction is suggested and used in the text. The *Dos mundos* textbook has been used in the Spanish program for several years and it has received great acceptance from the students.

The majority of the students in the program are English native speakers, although a small number have English as a second language. The students’ level of Spanish when they enter the program in the first semester is assumed to be that of a total beginner. At the end of the second year of instruction, students are expected to be at an intermediate level of proficiency (B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

¹ These are strategies used by learners to avoid using problematic structures, giving the false impression of committing no errors at all (Torijano Perez 2002).

2.2. Data collection procedures

As mentioned above, the corpus consisted of written tests produced by the students as part of their assessment plan, in the Spanish program during the year 2008². The students present four written tests throughout the semester. For the purpose of this study, only tests taken towards the end of the semester were used. These tests contained tasks which required students to produce grammatical content studied throughout the semester including compositions that involved the production of full sentences and/or short paragraphs, which provide a more global perspective of the errors committed by the students.

The data was collected in two stages. In the first stage, 151 first year written tests were examined to locate, identify and classify grammatical errors according to the linguistic criteria selected (see 2.3.1.). In the second stage, 44 second year written tests were examined to determine presence of the most frequent grammatical errors found in first year students. The data collected were coded to reflect each of the categories comprising the linguistic criteria designed to classify and describe the errors (see Appendix for codification of errors).

2.3. Methodology

This study followed EA methodology procedures proposed and used by SFL EA studies carried out for pedagogical purposes (Vazquez 1991; Fernandez 1997; Torijano Perez 2002; Sanchez Iglesias 2004), which consist in classifying the errors found, determining their gravity, and providing a possible explanation for their occurrence.

2.3.1. Errors classification

A linguistic criterion for classifying learners' errors allows organising errors according to language subsystems and items affected. Grammatical errors identified in the corpus were classified, as follows:

- According to the language area affected: morphological, syntactic or morphosyntactic errors.
- According to the grammatical system and the type of error: concordance (gender, number and person), verb (conjugation, use of the infinitive, irregular verbs misformation and tense), and sentence structure errors (omission, addition, misselection and misordering of language elements).
- According to the word class affected: definite articles, indefinite articles, nouns, personal pronouns, indirect object pronouns, verbs, prepositions, possessive adjectives, adverbs and adjectives.

2.3.2. Errors evaluation of gravity and their explanation

In alignment with criteria proposed by SFL researchers such as Fernandez Jodar (2006), Fernandez (1997) and Vazquez (1991), the frequency criterion was applied to evaluate errors' gravity. In first place, first year grammatical errors were quantified in order to determine their frequency according to the linguistic classification explained above. In second place, error's gravity was also evaluated by determining the persistency of first year most frequent grammatical errors in second year students. Most frequent grammatical errors identified in this study were explained according to an etiological criterion used by most SFL EA researchers (Vazquez 1991; Fernandez 1997; Alexopoulou 2006).

² Following school's regulations, only written tests produced, at least, one and a half years before the date of commencing the project were allowed to be used for research.

Following etiological criteria, errors can be classified into “Inter-lingual” or “Intra-lingual”. Inter-lingual errors are those errors that can be attributed to the interference of the learners’ native language structure (Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982). On the other hand, Intra-lingual errors are independent from learners’ language background (Corder 1978), and their origins are found within the structure of the TL itself and the learning strategies put in place by second language learners (Richards 1971). However, an error can have more than one source. For instance, an error due to L1 interference can also find its origin in an intra-lingual mechanism (Fernandez 1997), such as in errors of gender concordance between nouns and articles, where English speakers commit errors due to L1 interference (English does not possess such grammatical feature), but put in place intra-lingual mechanisms, such as false analogy of similar forms to try out their new acquired rule system. Most common etiological criteria used by EA researchers, including SFL studies, are summarised and explained here:

Inter-lingual strategies: are based on the influence learners’ mother tongue or any other language they speak has on the errors they commit. This is generally known as interference of native language and/or other languages. Common grammar errors in Spanish due to inter-lingual strategies employed by English native speakers are those regarding gender and number noun – adjective agreement, especially at beginning levels. Since English does not have this feature, learners have difficulties acquiring it.

Intra-lingual strategies: are based on the TL structure itself, and learning strategies put in place during the learning process. The most common intra-lingual strategies found are the following:

- *Hypergeneralization or generalization of grammar rules* where it is not appropriate to apply them (also called false generalization). It is considered the product of regularising language structures found to be alike (Alexopoulou 2006). Common grammar errors in Spanish due to hypergeneralization include the regularization of irregular verbs (Fernandez 1997).
- *Hypercorrection* is the mechanism opposite to hypergeneralization. In this case, learners apply rule exceptions as the general rule. A common error in Spanish due to hypercorrection is the opposite to the explained above: the erroneous application of irregular verbs rules.
- *Influence of the dominant form* is the incorrect use of most frequent or less difficult forms, such as the use of the infinitive form of the verb or the present tense in Spanish (Fernandez 1997).
- *Neutralization* occurs with linguistic items that are opposed to each other, such as perfect/imperfect verb forms, or masculine/feminine. By applying this mechanism learners simply choose one over the other one.
- *False analogy* (James 1998) occurs when the learner assumes that one linguistic item behaves like another one which is similar. An example in Spanish is the use of “fui” (I went) instead of “fue” (s/he went).
- *Incomplete rule application* occurs when the learner applies only part of a rule, normally because of insufficient practice. An example in Spanish is the incorrect use of possessive adjectives, as in: *¿Cuándo es tu cumpleaños? *Tu cumpleaños es el 30 de septiembre* (When is your birthday? *Your birthday is the 30th of September). In this example, the learner should have answered, *Mi cumpleaños es el 30 de septiembre* (My birthday is the 30th of September), instead of repeating the possessive adjective from the question.

3. Data analysis

The objective of this analysis was to determine the most frequent grammatical errors carried over from first to second year of instruction, and to explain reasons for those errors' occurrence. In order to answer the first question, grammatical errors found in first year students were classified following the linguistic criteria explained above (see 2.3.1.), and the most frequent grammatical errors were determined and explained according to the etiological criteria provided. In order to answer the second question, second year written tests were examined to determine the presence of the most frequent grammatical errors found in first year students. The errors found were also explained according to etiological criteria.

3.1. Analysis of first year students' grammatical errors

550 grammatical errors were identified in 102 written tests corresponding to the last exam of the first semester, and a total of 234 were identified in 49 written tests corresponding to the second last exam of the second semester. The results were then summarised per linguistic criterion of classification, as follows:

According to Language area, the majority of the errors found are morphosyntactic errors, followed by syntactic and morphological. In Table 1 the total number of errors by Language area and Grammatical system affected is shown in each semester respectively:

Grammatical System (1 st and 2 nd semester)								
	Concordance		Verb System		Sentence Structure		Total	
Language Area	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd
Morphology			75	41			75	41
Syntax					217	76	217	76
Morphosyntax	215	93	43	24			258	117
Total	215	93	118	65	217	76	550	234

Table 1: First and second semester grammatical errors by Language area and Grammatical system.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of errors according to Language area in both semesters. We can observe that morphosyntactic errors represent the majority of the grammatical errors with a small difference from semester 1 (47%) to semester 2 (50%). syntactic errors are the second most frequent grammatical errors, with semester 1 numbers (39%) being slightly higher than semester 2 (32%). As per morphological errors, they represent the least frequent grammatical errors (14% in semester 1 and 18% in semester 2). It is worth pointing out here that a good proportion of morphological errors are included within the morphosyntactic errors, given that morphosyntactic errors are those affecting the syntax of the phrase as well as the morphology of the word involved.

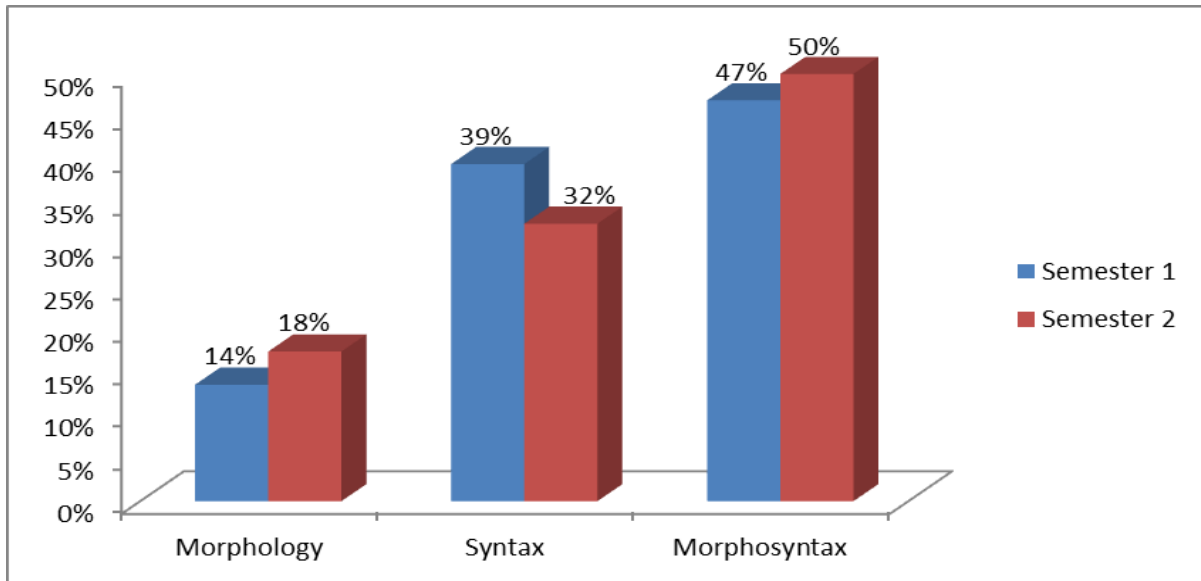


Figure 1: Grammatical errors by language area.

Due to its significance in terms of frequency, the analysis will concentrate on morphosyntactic errors. As per morphological and syntactic errors, only results and some examples will be presented.

3.1.1. Morphological errors

All of the morphological errors identified in both semesters correspond to errors in the verb grammatical system. That is, conjugation errors, which are errors due to the confusion among the three verb conjugations in Spanish (verbs ending in *ar*, *er* and *ir*). The following are examples of these errors taken from our data:

- (1) Mis amigos y yo *salemos a cenar (My friends and I go out for dinner)
subject verb
- (2) Ella *cenió con sus amigos (She had dinner with her friends)
subject verb

Irregular verb misformation are errors due to violation of rules to produce certain irregular verbs, such as “hacer”, “jugar”, “salir” and “dormir”:

- (3) Mis amigos y yo *juegamos al futbol (My friends and I play football)
subject verb
- (4) Yo siempre *haco mi tarea (I always do my homework)
subject verb

In Table 2, the total number of morphological errors by type of error is shown:

Type of error (1 st and 2 nd semester)						
	Conjugation		Irregular verbs misformation		Total	
Grammatical System	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd
Verb System	42	28	33	13	75	41
Total	42	28	33	13	75	41

Table 2: First and second semester Morphological errors by Type of error.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of morphological errors according to type of error in both semesters. We can observe that conjugation errors represent the majority of the morphological errors, with semester 2 errors (68%) being higher than semester 1 (56%). Errors due to misformation of irregular verbs are higher in semester 1 (44%) than in semester 2 (32%) and represent the second most frequent morphological errors. Both types of errors are explained by Fernandez (1997) as cases of hypergeneralization or hypercorrection of grammar rules (see 2.3.2.).

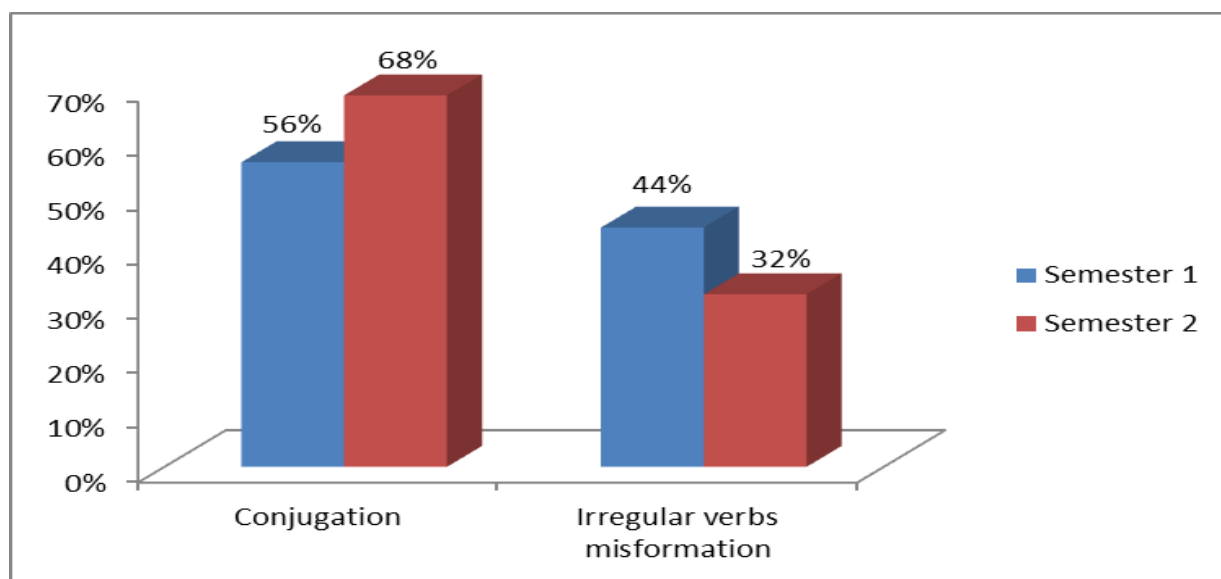


Figure 2: Morphological errors according to type of error

3.1.2. Syntactic errors

Errors identified as syntactic errors correspond to the linguistic criterion used to classify errors affecting surface language structures. The majority of these errors in both semesters are due to the omission of necessary language items within the structure. The following are examples³:

- (5) **El reloj* ? *arriba de la pizarra* (The clock is above the board)
 subject verb

³ The question mark (?) represents the omitted item. In (5), the verb *está*, and in (6), the reflexive pronoun *me*.

- (6) **Si, yo ? bañé ayer* (Yes, I did take a bath yesterday)
 subject reflexive verb
 pronoun

In Table 3, the total number of syntactic errors by type of error is shown:

Type of error (1 st and 2 nd semester)										
	Addition		Misordering		Misselection		Omission		Total	
Grammatical System	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd
<i>Sentence Structure</i>	37	11	2	5	77	20	101	40	217	76
Total	37	11	2	5	77	20	101	40	217	76

Table 3: First and second semester syntactic errors by grammatical system and type of error.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of syntactic errors according to type of error in both semesters. In order of frequency, we can observe that omission errors represent the majority of the syntactic errors, with semester 2 errors (53%) being higher than semester 1 (47%), followed by errors due to misselection of language items, with semester 1 errors (35%) being higher than semester 2 (26%). Addition and misordering errors represent the least frequent syntactic errors in both semesters. Also Fernandez (1997), found a significant number of omission errors in her study and she suggests that these errors reflect strategies of simplification that learners apply when they are not sure about the correct use of the omitted item, but also these errors reflect structures of the learners' L1 (L1 interference).

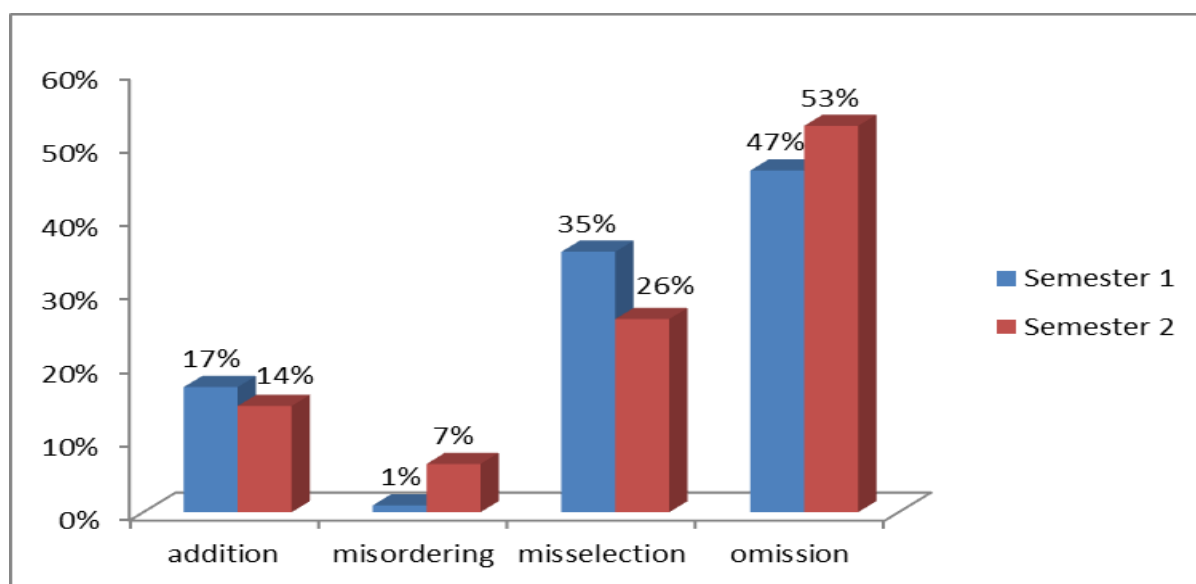


Figure 3: Syntactic errors according to type of error

3.1.3. Morphosyntactic errors

Morphosyntactic errors constitute the majority of the grammatical errors found in first year students. In Table 4, the total number of morphosyntactic errors by grammatical system and type of error is shown. Errors of concordance were observed in gender, number and person. Errors in the verb system were identified in the use of the infinitive and the tense of the verb. The latter are only found in semester 2 students because it is only then that students

have knowledge of at least two verb tenses in Spanish: the Present and the *Pretérito Indefinido* (called “Preterite” in English).

Type of error (1 st and 2 nd semester)												
Grammatical System	Use of the infinitive		gender		number		person		tense		Total	
	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd	1 st	2 nd
Concordance			87	38	62	24	66	31			215	93
Verb system	43	15								9	43	24
Total	43	15	87	38	62	24	66	31		9	258	117

Table 4: First and second semester morphosyntactic errors by grammatical system and type of error.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of morphosyntactic errors according to grammatical system in both semesters. We can observe that concordance errors represent the majority of the morphosyntactic errors, with semester 1 errors (83%) being higher than semester 2 (79%). Errors in the verb system (use of infinitive and tense) are the second most frequent morphosyntactic errors, with semester 1 errors (17%) being lower than semester 2 (21%).

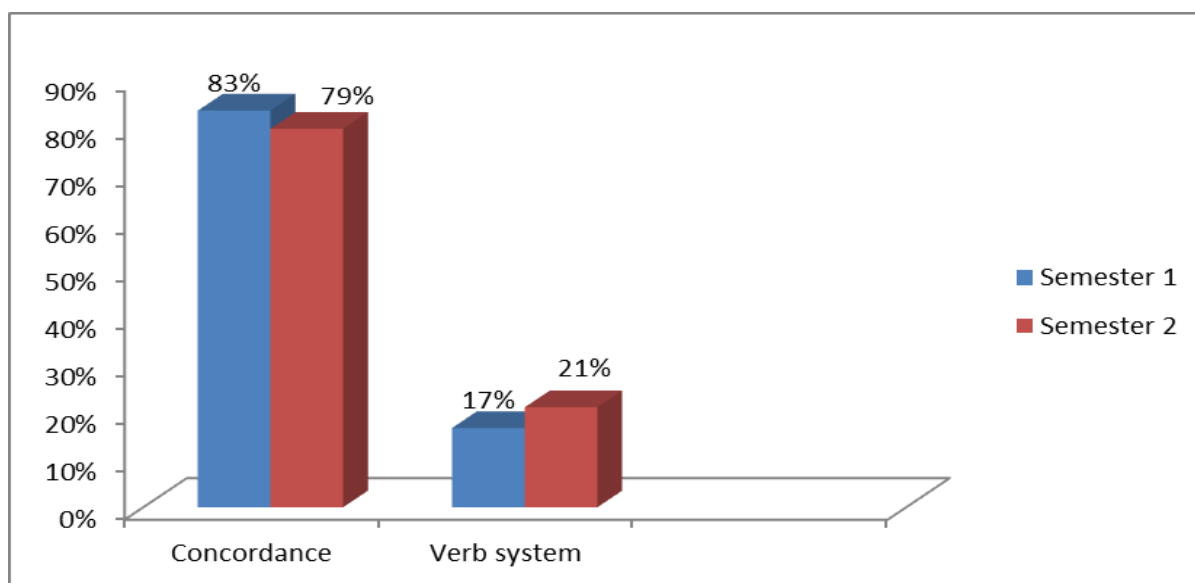


Figure 4: Morphosyntactic errors according to grammatical system

Due to its significance in terms of frequency, it can be concluded that morphosyntactic errors in the concordance grammatical system represent the most problematic area for first year students (83% in semester 1 and 79% in semester 2). Following, these errors will be analysed with the ultimate aim of providing explanation for their occurrence.

Grammatical errors identified as *concordance errors* in first year students correspond to the following categories in order of frequency: (a) gender; (b) person; and (c) number. Concordance in Spanish is understood as a morphosyntactic process which implies morphological variations motivated by syntactic factors (Azevedo 1992). Concordance also refers to the relationship between the subject and the verb in terms of number and person. In the following sections gender, person and number concordance errors will be analysed.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of concordance errors. We can observe that gender errors represent the majority in both semesters (40% and 41% respectively) followed by person (31% and 33%), and number errors (29% and 26%).

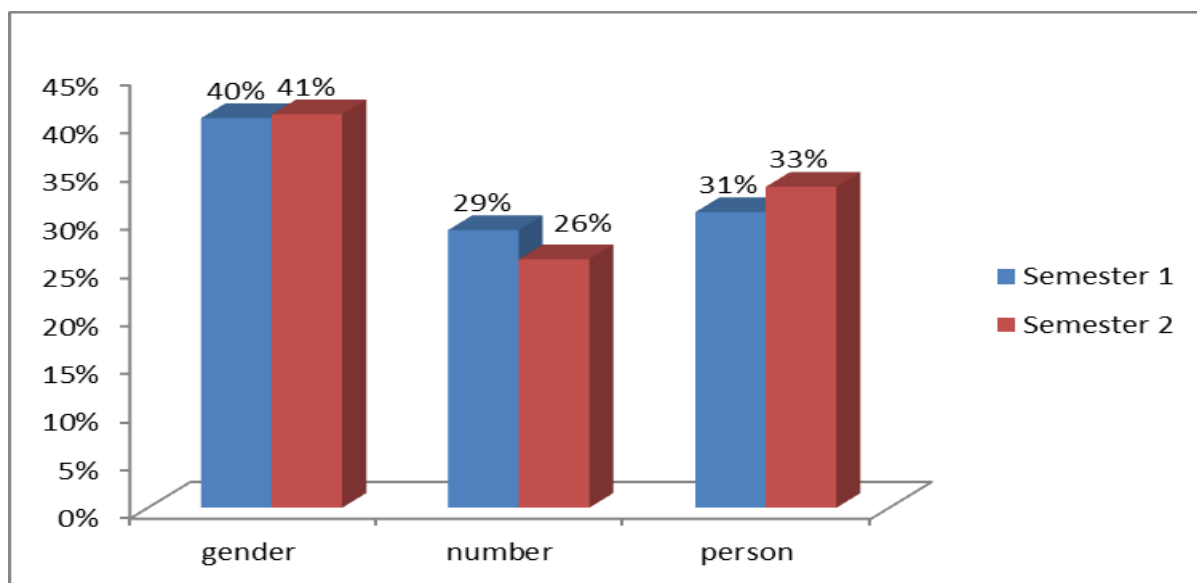


Figure 5: Concordance errors according to type of error

Concordance errors in gender represent the most problematic grammatical area for first year students. Gender in Spanish refers to a grammatical property by which all nouns are either masculine or feminine, which does not necessarily refer to a biological gender. According to this feature, adjectives, articles and possessives must agree with the gender of the noun (Kattan-Ibarra and Pountain 2003).

Figure 6 shows the distribution of gender errors according to word class. We can observe that frequencies vary significantly⁴. Nevertheless, we can identify gender errors in articles as the most frequent (definitive articles 84% in semester 1 and indefinite articles 58% in semester 2) followed by gender errors in adjectives (9% in semester 1 and 16% in semester 2).

1 Such variation could be due to the content of the tests chosen as samples. In the case of definite and indefinite articles, the former are more practiced in the 1st semester and the latter in the second semester.

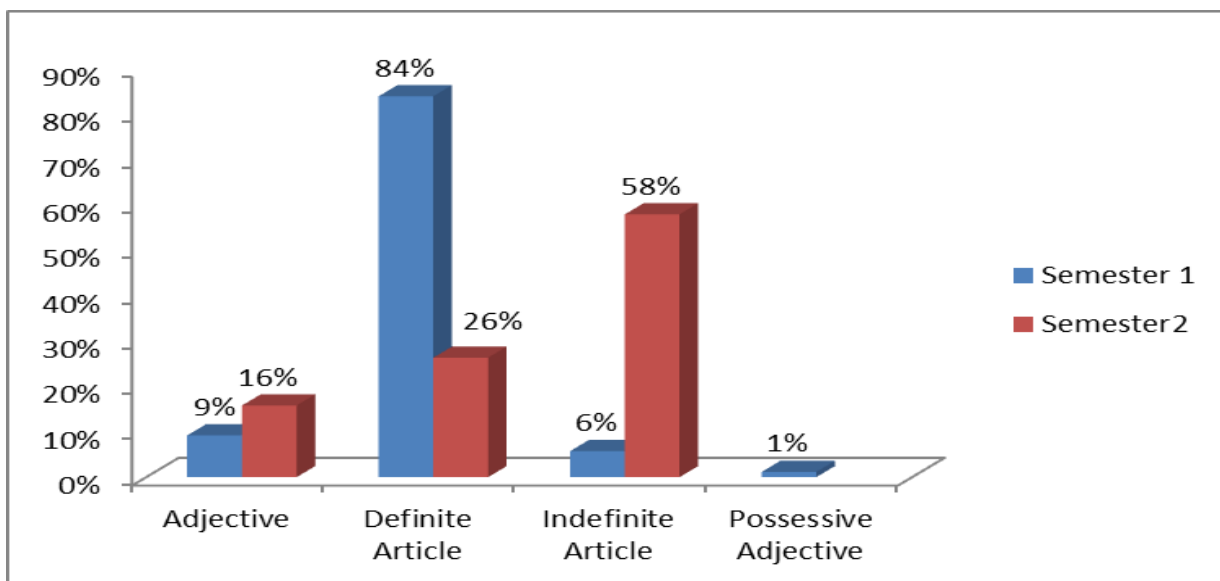


Figure 6: Gender errors according to word class

The gender of articles and adjectives depends on the gender of the noun to which they are related. Hence, learners' difficulties in this area are based on their inability to identify the gender of the noun in first place (Vazquez 1991; Cooper 2007). In general, learners tend to apply the first rule they learn: nouns ending in *a* are feminine and nouns ending in *o* are masculine. Nevertheless, the existence of exceptions to that rule, such as those nouns ending in *e* or in consonants, creates uncertainty which makes learners to assign the wrong gender by making false analogies (Vazquez 1991). In this study we found phrases such as *Yo tomo el café y *el leche* (I drink coffee and milk) where the learner erroneously assigned the same gender to *café* and *leche* due to a false analogy between the two nouns. Hypergeneralization of rules also explain gender errors, such as in the phrase *Hago mis tareas todas *las dias* (I do my homework everyday) where the learner applied the general rule of nouns ending in *a* being feminine, ignoring an exception to that rule with the word *día* being masculine for etymological reasons. Most of all, errors in gender seem to be due to intra-linguistic mechanisms of neutralization of the opposites masculine/feminine; ignoring the gender of the noun learners simply chose one over the other. The following phrases are examples:

(7) *Mis padres cocinan *el cena* (My parents cook dinner)
 article noun
 (masculine) (feminine)

(8) *En mi casa también hay *una armario* (In my house there is also a wardrobe)
 article noun
 (feminine) (masculine)

A few cases of concordance errors in adjectives were found in the sample. Most of them related to the use of *todo* (all) and *mucho* (a lot):

(9) *(Hago mis tareas) *todas las dias* (I do my homework everyday)
 adjective article noun
 (feminine)(feminine)(masculine)

- (10) *Hay *mucho tareas de español* (There is too much Spanish homework)
 adjective noun noun
 (masc.) (fem.) (masc.)

These two adjectives denote quantity and, contrary to the general rule of placing adjectives after the noun, they are normally placed before the noun, which seems to create confusion in the learners. In the first example, we can observe that the student erroneously makes the adjective to agree with the noun *días*, which despite of ending in *a* is not feminine but masculine. In the second example, it is possible that the learner tried to make *mucho* to agree with *español*, which is a masculine noun. Moreover, students could also get confused with *todo* and *mucho* acting as adverbs which do not have a gender and therefore do not change their morphology (Vazquez 1991).

Concordance in person has been identified as the second most problematic grammatical area for the students. Figure 7 shows the distribution of person errors according to the word class affected. We can observe that the majority of these errors in both semesters (95% and 90% respectively) are subject-verb concordance errors.

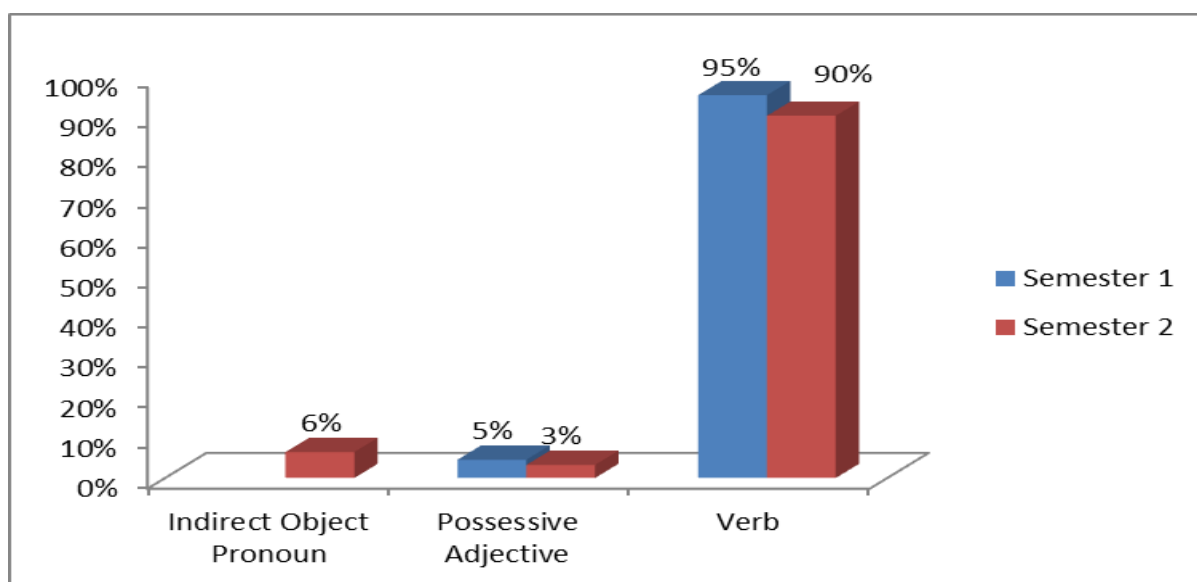


Figure 7: Person errors according to word class

In Spanish, the form of the verb inflects according to the subject to mark the grammatical person involved. Subject-verb concordance errors found in this study are due to the use of the incorrect verb form in relation to its subject. Learner's difficulties in this area seem to have originated from their inability to relate the subject of the verb with its corresponding person within the verb system. Hence, most person errors are due to psycholinguistic mechanisms put in place by learners in order to cope with such inability. For instance, in the following phrases learners make false analogies of similar forms (one person plural for another):

- (11) *Vosotros *jugamos al tenis* (You all play tennis)
 subject verb
 (2nd person) (1st person)

- (12) *Mi amiga y yo *hablan* (My friend and I talk)
 subject verb
 (1st person) (3rd person)

Hypergeneralization of rules also takes place in cases such as the incorrect use of the second person singular for another person plural, where the learner generalises the plural form of nouns to the form of the verb ending in *s*:

(13) ...mis padres *trabajas... (My parents work)
 subject verb
 (3rd pers) (2nd pers)

(14) ...los estudiantes *hablas... (The students talk)
 subject verb
 (3rd person) (2nd person)

Other errors, such as the incorrect use of the 1st and 3rd person, seem to be due to the influence of the dominant form. The students seem to have had more practice with these two forms so they erroneously use them indistinctively instead of producing the correct form. In these two following cases, the learner should have produced the 2nd person form of the verb (*sales* and *vas*, respectively):

(15) (Tú) *salgo a la biblioteca (You go out to the library)
 subject verb
 (2nd person) (1st person)

(16) ¿(Tú) *va a la biblioteca...? (Do you go to the library?)
 subject verb
 (2nd person) (3rd person)

In these two other cases bellow, the learner should have produced the 3rd person form of the verb (*lavó* and *duchó*, respectively):

(17) ...Luego ella *lavé la ropa... (Then, she washed her clothes)
 subject verb
 (3rd pers) (1st pers)

(18) Adriana primero se *duché (Adriana first took a shower)
 subject verb
 (3rd person) (1st person)

Concordance in number has been identified as the third most problematic grammatical area for students. Figure 8 shows the distribution of number errors according to word class. As with gender errors we can observe that frequencies vary significantly according to the word class affected. Nevertheless, we can identify number errors in verbs as the most frequent (50% in semester 1 and 33% in semester 2) followed by possessive adjectives (26% in semester 1 and 33% in semester 2) and nouns being significant only in semester 2 (21%).

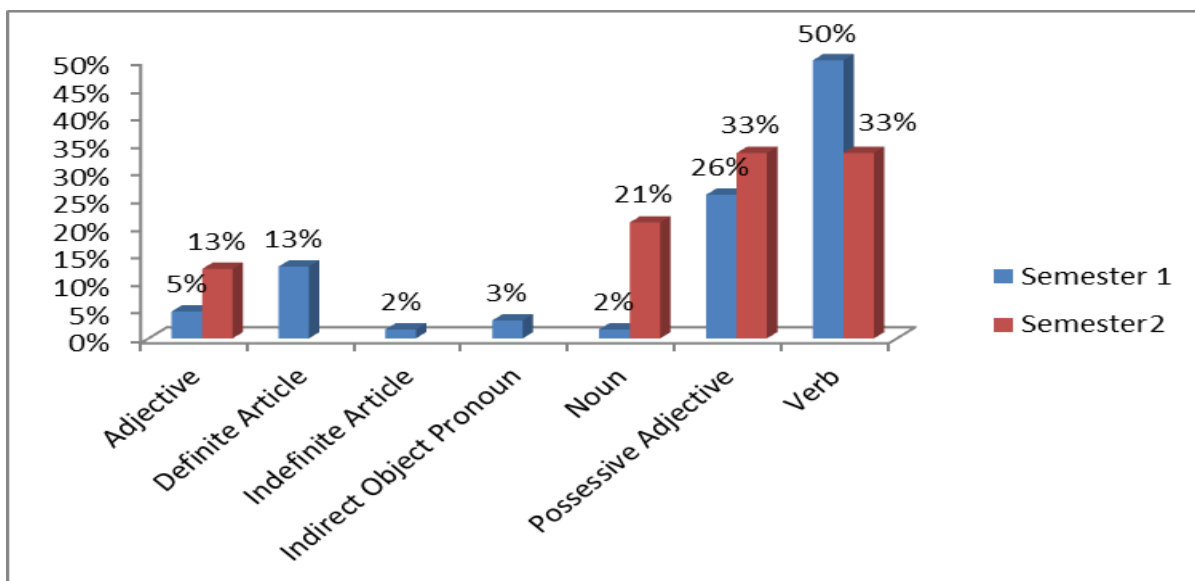


Figure 8: Number errors according to word class.

Number errors in verbs represent another violation of the subject-verb concordance rule. As with person, subject and verb must also agree in number with the verb. Most number errors found in this study seem to have originated from psycholinguistic mechanisms, such as the incomplete application of a rule. We can observe that learners partially apply subject-verb concordance rules by producing the correct conjugated form according to person, but failing to make the verb agree in number as well. The following are examples of number errors:

This phrase shows the incorrect use of the 3rd person plural where the learner is producing the third person plural (*Ellos/Ellas*) of the verb, instead of the corresponding third person singular (*Ella: Adriana*).

- (19) *Adriana* **van a su clase...* (Adriana goes to her class...)
 subject verb
 (3rd person/singular) (3rd person/plural)

In this other phrase the learner is incorrectly producing the third person singular (*Él/Ella*) of the verb, instead of the corresponding third person plural (*Ellos: Los libros*).

- (20) *Los libros* **esta detras de la silla* (The books are behind the chair)
 subject verb
 (3rd person/plural) (3rd person/singular)

This other example shows the incorrect use of the 1st person singular where the learner is making the verb agree with the first person singular (*Yo*), excluding *Mi amiga* as part of the subject. In which case, the learner should have produced the first person plural (*nosotros*).

- (21) *Mi amiga y yo* **hago la tarea* (My friend and I do the homework)
 subject verb
 (3rd person/plural) (3rd person/singular)

An interesting case is that of the verb *Gustar* (to like or to please), which belongs to the ‘gustar-like type verbs’ (Maldonado 2008). It behaves differently from regular verbs in that it has a middle voice construction which literally translates as ‘something is pleasing to someone’. This construction normally presents the order Indirect Object (IO), verb, subject,

which tends to confuse the learner into thinking that the IO is the subject of the verb. The following are number errors with the verb *Gustar*:

- (22) *A mis padres* *les* **gustan* *ver la televisión*
 IO IOP verb subject
 (3rd person/plural) (3rd person/plural) (plural) (singular)

(My parents like watching TV)

- (23) *A mis amigos y yo* *nos* **gustan* *ir al cine*
 IO IOP verb subject
 (1st person/plural) (1st person/plural) (plural) (singular)

(My friends and I like going to the movies)

In these cases, hypergeneralization of subject-verb concordance rules takes place, when the learner makes the verb to agree with the IO for looking like a prototypical subject (*Mis padres/Mis amigos*), and not with the actual subject (*ver la televisión/ ir al cine*) which s/he seems to confuse with the object.

Number errors in Possessive Adjectives (PA) represent the second most frequent errors in number concordance. As explained before, articles and adjectives must agree in gender and number with the noun, but PA must only agree in number with the noun indicating the possessed object. Most number errors in PA found in this study seem to have originated from inter-lingual mechanisms due to direct translation from English into Spanish, since English PA do not need to agree in number with the noun. Intra-linguistic mechanisms also take place in the following phrase where the learner seems to make a false analogy of similar forms by making the PA agree with the subject *Mis padres* and not with the possessed object *perro*:

- (24) *Mis padres* *pasean* **sus* *perro*
 subject verb PA noun
 (3rd person/plural) (3rd person/plural) (plural) (singular)
 (My parents walk their dog)

3.2. Analysis of second year students' grammatical errors

The second part of the analysis consisted in identifying persistency of first year students' most frequent grammatical errors in second year students. For that purpose, 44 written tests corresponding to the last exam of the first semester were examined and a total of 123 concordance errors were identified. In Table 5 the total number of concordance errors by type of error and word class is shown:

Type of error				
Word class	gender	number	person	Total
<i>Adjective</i>	20	8		28
<i>Definite Article</i>	28	4		32
<i>Indefinite Article</i>	18			18

<i>Indirect Object Pronoun</i>			2	2
<i>Noun</i>		1		1
<i>Possessive Adjective</i>	1	1		2
<i>Verb</i>		9	31	40
Total	67	23	33	123

Table 5: Second year first semester concordance errors by type of error

Figure 9 shows the distribution of concordance errors. In order of frequency, we can observe that gender errors represent 54% of all concordance errors identified, followed by person errors (27%) and number (19%).

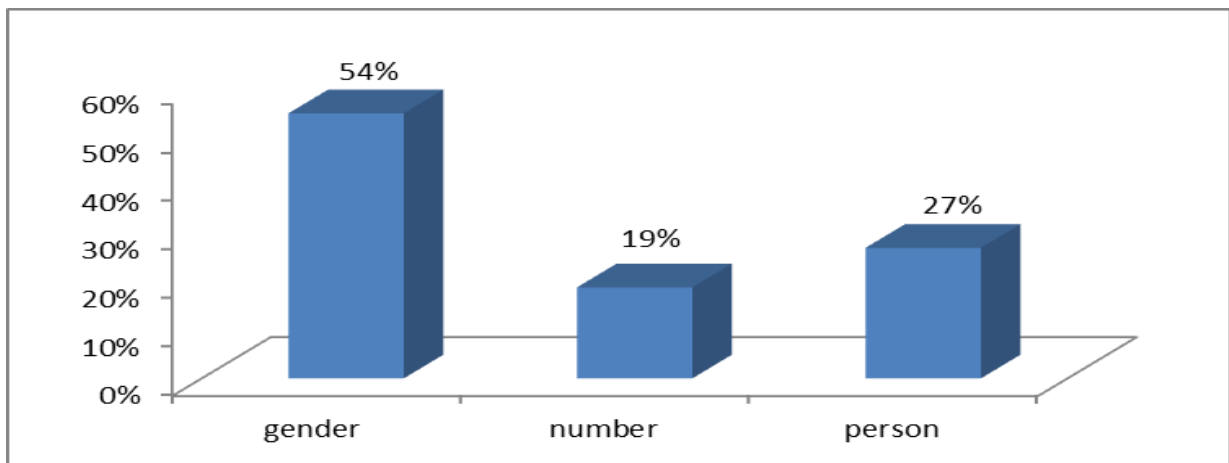


Figure 9: Concordance errors by type of error

Figure 10 shows the distribution of gender errors according to word class. As with first year students, we can identify gender errors in articles as the most frequent (definitive articles 42% and indefinite articles 27%) followed by gender errors in adjectives (30%)⁵.

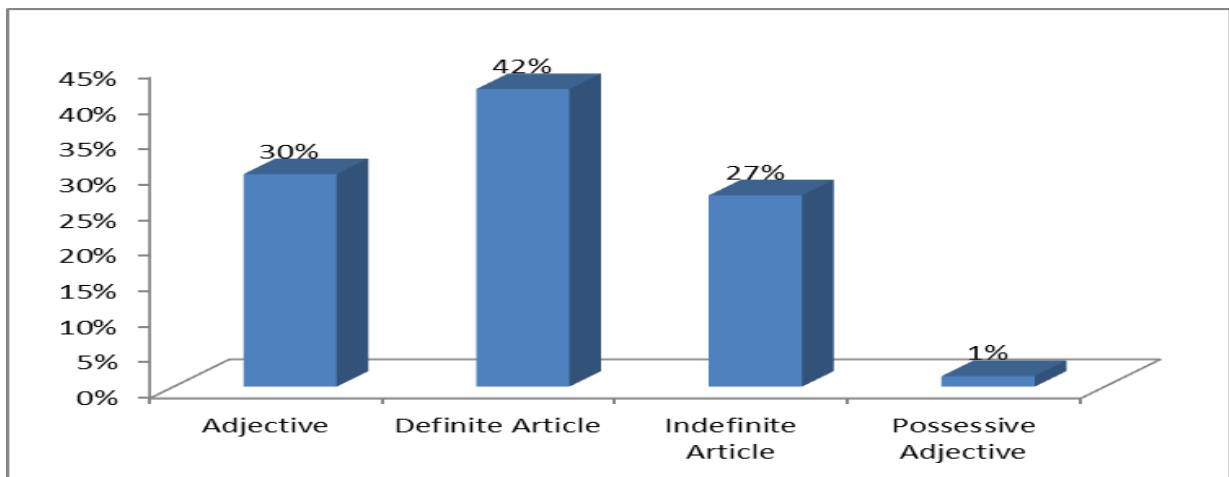


Figure 10: Gender errors according to word class

⁵ The minimal presence of gender errors in possessive adjectives is possibly due to the sample analysed were tests did not require possessive adjectives' production.

Most gender errors in articles take place in words whose ending does not conform to the general rule that words ending in *a* are feminine and words ending in *o* are masculine. Therefore, an intra-lingual mechanism of neutralization takes place in which the learner randomly chooses the gender of the noun. The following phrases are examples of gender errors in articles:

(26) ...cuando la mujer llegó a **la* *hospital*... (When the woman got to the
 article noun hospital)
 (fem.) (masc.)

(27) ...vi un coche en **un* *bocacalle*. (I saw a car at the entrance of the road)
 article noun
 (fem.) (masc.)

Most of gender errors in adjectives occurred when the student failed to identify the gender of the noun with a false analogy taking place. Nevertheless, in the following examples we can also observe that learners do follow concordance rules to some extent, since the adjective agrees with the gender erroneously assigned to the noun:

(28) ¡Fue **un* *noche* muy **ocupado*! (It was a very busy night!)
 article noun adjective
 (masc.) (fem.) (masculine)

(29) ...dos pildoras de nurofen **todas* **las* *días* (two neurofen pills every day)
 adjective article noun
 (fem.) (fem.) (masc.)

Figure 11 shows the distribution of person errors according to the word class affected. As with first year students, we can observe that the majority of these errors are subject-verb concordance errors (94%).

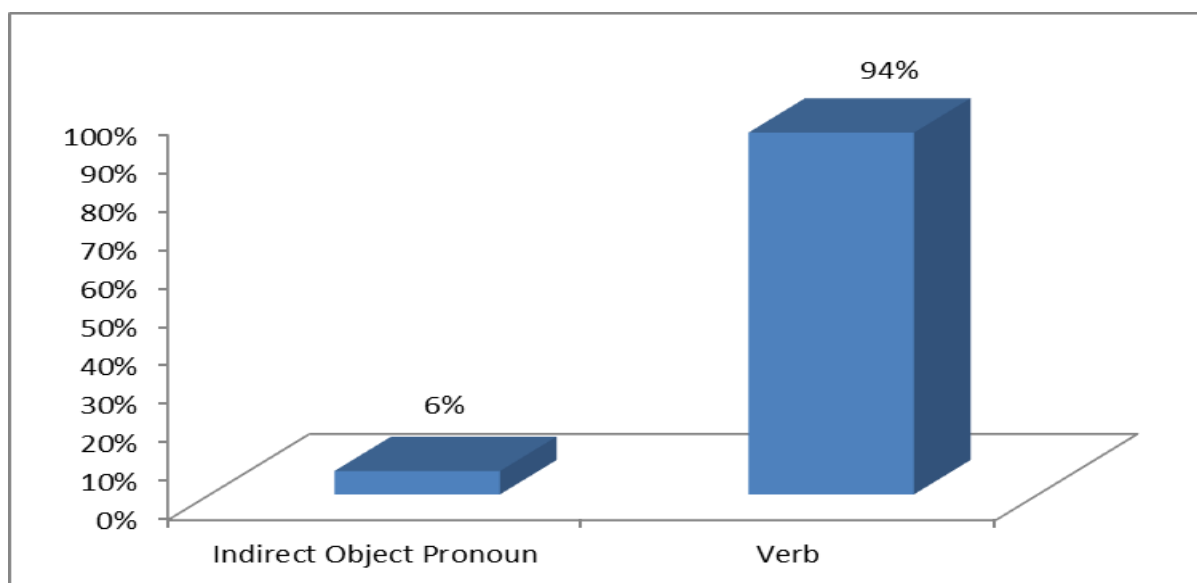


Figure 11: Person errors according to word class.

Most subject-verb concordance errors found in second year students are due to the use of the incorrect verb form in third person, such as:

(30) (Yo) **fue a ver al doctor...* (I went to see the doctor)
 subject verb
 (1st person) (3rd person)

(31) (Yo) *Me* **cayó de un arbol...* (I fell off a tree)
 subject verb
 (1st person) (3rd person)

It was also noticeable the presence of errors due to the use of the incorrect verb form in first person, such as:

(32) ...(mi prima) **tuve dolor...* (my cousin had pain)
 subject verb
 (3rd person) (1st person)

(33) ...mi madre **fui conmigo al hospital.* (my mother went with me to the hospital)
 subject verb
 (3rd person) (1st person)

As the examples observed in first year, these errors also seem to have originated from the influence of the dominant form; that is students are more used to practice these two forms so they erroneously use them indistinctively. Interestingly, in cases in which the verb was accompanied by the indirect object pronoun (IOP) (in bold in the following two examples), students seem to have no difficulties making the correct concordance with the subject⁶, which leads us to conclude that the psycholinguistic mechanism put in place in these cases is that of the incomplete application of rules:

(34) (yo) ***me*** **puso enfermo en Jemen* (I fell sick in Yemen)
 subject IOP verb
 (1st person) (1st person) (3rd person)

(35) ...su amigo ***se*** **puse nervioso.* (Her friend was nervous)
 subject IOP verb
 (3rd person) (3rd person) (1st person)

Figure 12 shows the distribution of number errors according to word class. In order of frequency, we can observe that number errors in verbs are the most frequent (39%) followed by adjectives (35%) and definite articles (17%).

2 Minimal cases of these errors were identified (6%).

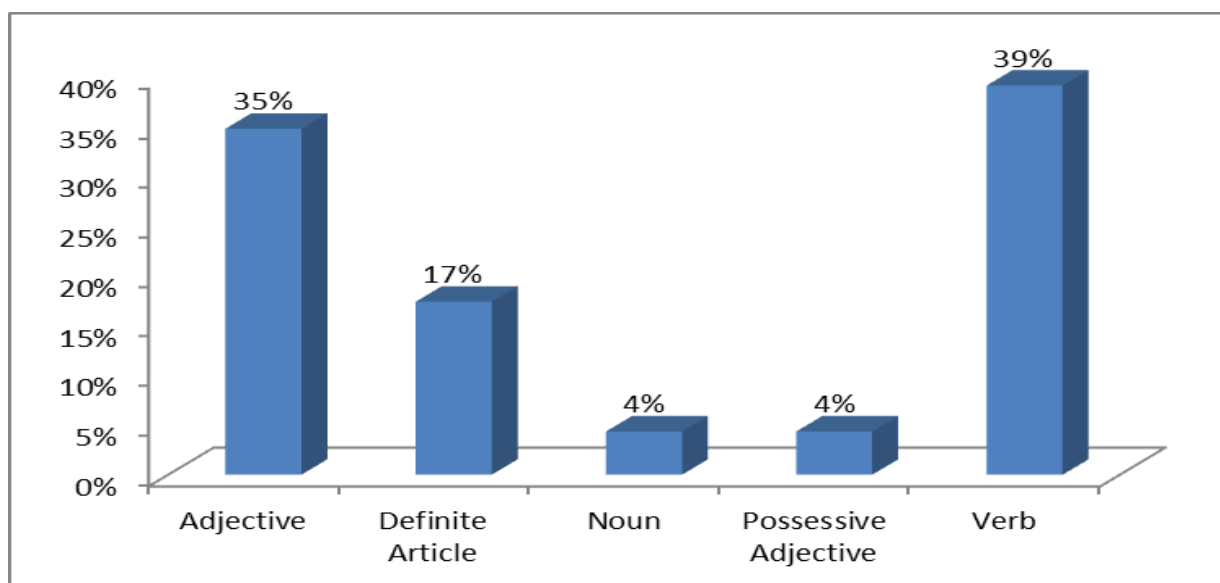


Figure 12: Number errors according to word class.

In this category of errors, the order of frequency with respect to first year students' errors is somewhat different. Although number errors in verbs represent the most frequent in both years, adjectives and definite article errors represent the second and third most frequent number errors in second year; whereas in first year, second and third most frequent number errors were possessive adjectives and nouns. Such difference could be due either to the sample examined or to the second year students' higher level of proficiency in those areas that resulted of lower frequency. Examples of number errors in verbs in second year students are the following:

Incorrect use of the third person plural:

(36) ...*un poco mas tarde* **llegaron* *la policia*... (the police arrived a bit later)
 verb subject
 (3rd ppl) (3rd psg)

(37) ...*nadie* **tuvieron ir al hospital*... (no one had to go to the hospital)
 subject verb
 (3rd person/sg) (3rd person/plural)

Incorrect use of the third person singular:

(38) (*ellos*) No **tuvo que ir al hospital*. (They didn't have to go the hospital)
 subject verb
 (3rd p.pl) (1st p.sg.)

These cases reflect the students' inability to identify the number corresponding to the noun related to the verb. As with verb errors in first year students, these errors could be explained by intra-lingual mechanisms, such as the incomplete application of conjugation rules, and/or mechanisms due to the L1 interference (Inter-lingual), such as in the case of *la policia* (the police) (a collective noun in Spanish), which in English is a plural noun. Number errors in adjectives seem to have originated from the students' inability to identify the noun or subject

to which the adjective is related, due to the distance between the two of them (Vazquez 1991; Fernandez 1997). Moreover, an inter-lingual mechanism also seems to take place due to the fact that adjectives do not inflect in English. The following phrases are examples:

- (39) *¡Que vacaciones tan *terrible!* (what a terrible vacation!)
 noun adjective
 (plural) (singular)
- (40) ...*mi hermano y yo se pusimos *enfermo...* (My brother and I fell ill)
 subject adjective
 (plural) (singular)

4. Discussion of results

4.1. First year

The data show that the results in terms of frequency coincided in both semesters. Moreover, SFL researchers have regularly identified morphosyntactic errors as the most frequent and persistent grammatical errors in Spanish learners of all levels and language backgrounds (Vazquez 1991; Fernandez 1997; Fernandez Jodar 2006).

As per errors of concordance specifically, the results also coincided with other studies in which concordance of gender errors were found to be more problematic for students than number errors (Vazquez 1991; Fernandez 1997; Fernandez Jodar 2006; Cooper 2007). Some studies also found subject-verb concordance errors as the most frequent in their data (Fernandez 1997; Fernandez Jodar 2006). The majority of the concordance errors in this study could be explained with reference to intra-lingual mechanisms, such as the hypergeneralization of grammar rules and the false analogy of similar forms. Nevertheless, inter-lingual mechanisms were also found to play an important role in producing concordance errors; especially in learners whose L1 is English, since this grammatical feature in English is not as productive as in Spanish; concordance in gender, for instance, is not part of the English grammatical system.

4.2. Second year

The results of this part of the analysis show that all of first year students' most frequent grammatical errors persist in the second year of instruction. Moreover, the results in terms of frequency coincided with first year's order of frequency: Concordance of gender, followed by person and number. Other studies have also determined persistency of these errors throughout a program (Fernandez 1997; Fernandez Jodar 2006).

As per the explanation of concordance errors in second year, intra-lingual mechanisms, such as those identified in first year students also take place in second year students. Nevertheless, inter-lingual mechanisms continue to have an important influence in the production of concordance errors in second year.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that morphosyntactic errors in the area of the concordance grammatical system were determined to be the most frequent grammatical errors in first year students (first

and second semester). Most frequent concordance errors were identified in the following order: gender, number and person. Intra-lingual mechanisms, such as the hypergeneralization of grammar rules and the false analogy of similar forms, were found to be the cause of most of the concordance errors. Nevertheless, inter-lingual mechanisms were also found to play an important role in producing concordance errors, especially because of the differences between English and Spanish in concordance rules. Persistency of first year students' most frequent grammatical errors by the second year of instruction was determined and the results in terms of frequency coincided with first year's order of frequency: concordance of gender, followed by person and number. Intra-lingual mechanisms, such as those identified in first year also take place in second year's students, and inter-lingual mechanisms were also found to continue to have an important influence in the production of concordance errors in second year.

This project is expected to contribute to the teaching of SFL at the University of Queensland by providing critical awareness of students' grammatical difficulties. The identification and classification of the most frequent grammatical errors in first year SFL students as well as those errors that are persistent by the second year of instruction provide teachers with empirical evidence of those areas representing major difficulties for the students. Moreover, informed knowledge of those mechanisms which explain the possible causes for the errors to occur is intended to provide a better understanding of the learning process itself.

This study contributes to Language Pedagogy (LP) by providing knowledge that allows prioritising pedagogical treatment of errors according to identified areas of difficulty. It benefits teachers by letting them know what learners still need to learn and the L2/FL areas in which they should focus more attention to improve learners' competence and performance.

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Appendix 1

Codification of errors

Language area	1	Morphosyntactical error
	2	Syntactic errors
	3	Morphosyntactic errors
Grammatical system	CC	Concordance errors
	SS	Sentence structure errors
	VS	Verbal system errors
Type of error	CC	Gender
		Number
		Person
	SS	Omission
		Addition
		Misselection
		Misordering
	VS	Tense
		Conjugation
Infinitive		
Misformation		
Word class	VE	Verb
	DA	Definite article
	IA	Indefinite article
	PR	Preposition
	AD	Adjective
	PA	Possessive adjective
	PP	Personal pronoun
	IOP	Indirect object pronoun
	NN	Noun
AV	Adverb	