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# Attitudes from Spanish teachers and students of ESL towards errors in the classroom

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**Title:** Attitudes from Spanish teachers and students of ESL towards errors in the classroom

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**Abstract:** Learning a second language (L2) has become a crucial need for the citizens of this globalized world, since there are constant opportunities for intercultural communication in their daily lives. However, L2 acquisition is a lengthy, complex process. Not only learners, but teachers make errors in the classroom. This study examines and compares the attitudes and opinions that both teachers and students of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Spain have towards errors in the classroom. Two online questionnaires were created and sent out: one of them aimed at students and the other aimed at teachers. Answers were analyzed and compared to discern whether the attitudes towards errors in the L2 classroom are positive or negative.

**Keywords:** English as a Second Language (ESL), error analysis, error correction, interference, interlanguage, L2, target language, second language acquisition.

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in a globalized world, where countries are strongly linked by international economic markets, population movements and educational exchanges, among other factors. This situation makes it necessary for many individuals to know more than one language in order to achieve successful global communication. These sociopolitical circumstances have contributed to an increase in the number of countries where a second language (L2) is taught in the first years of school. Apart from international relations, there are other reasons for teaching a L2 at school: in the case of India, Kenya and Uganda, for example, the L2 is the only medium through which certain scientific and technological knowledge can be acquired; and in other countries, L2 is important because it officially coexists with another tongue, as is the case in Canada (where the official languages are English and French), Belgium (with Dutch, French and German) or Switzerland (with German, French, Italian and Romansch), to name a few (Madrid, 2001:27).

English has become the world's common instrument of communication for all sorts of contexts, such as social settings, the academics, popular culture, business and trade. That is why, in most countries, the role of L2 is taken by English, becoming a mandatory subject in school, either as a second, third or foreign language. In fact, English is the most demanded language by teachers and students around the globe (Rubio & Martínez, 2008:52). Moreover, 91% of European students study English as a second language (Van Essen, 1997; as cited in Rubio & Martínez, 2008:52).

The global expansion of English has resulted in different labels for this language; Jenkins (2000) speaks of an *International English*, and Cristal (2003) of a *Euro-English* (as cited in Rubio & Martínez, 2008). Other nomenclatures, such as *Global English*, *World English*, *Common English*, *Continental English*, *General English*, *Engas* (English as associate language), or *Globish* can also be found all across the literature.

According to statistics from the European Commission (retrieved from Van Parys, 2012), Spain is the country with the fewest speakers of English as a foreign language (11.28%). This number clearly contrasts with the data of Sweden (where the corresponding number is 52.5%) and Denmark (where it is 52.1%), which are situated at the top of the list. The failure to learn English is a popular and relevant concern among Spanish citizens, and

it promotes a feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction about themselves when compared to the rest of the world.

But what estimates the level of proficiency in a language? Every language learner makes an abundance of errors throughout the learning process, and as they gradually acquire competence and knowledge in the target language, those errors begin occurring less and less frequently. Thus, as errors play a natural and common part in the ESL classroom, it is up to its members (i.e., teachers and students) to use them in their favor in the learning process.

## **AIM OF THE STUDY**

The present investigation aims to study and compare the opinions that students and teachers of ESL in Spain have about errors and error correction in the classroom, to find out whether there are any factors that could need further investigation, or find which changes need to be made in the curriculum and methodologies used in the ESL classroom. This research paper is structured in two parts. First, an extensive and thorough recollection of past studies on error analysis and second language learning has been made, to put the reader into context as to what is error analysis, and which are the most common errors that Spanish speakers make when learning English as a second or foreign language. The second part shows the findings of qualitative research conducted about errors in the ESL classroom. It would have been ideal to run a contrastive analysis of the errors committed by Spanish learners of English in the classroom, analyzing texts and identifying real errors, but due to time limitations, the investigation that was conducted was only to identify, analyze, and interpret what opinions both teachers and students of ESL in Spain have about errors in the learning process.

The secondary aim of this paper is to explore the most common errors in the Spanish ESL classroom, and the teacher's attitudes towards their correction. The present investigation will try to answer the following research questions:

- What are the teachers' opinions about errors in the ESL classroom?
- What are the students' opinions about errors in the ESL classroom?
- What are the most common errors in the Spanish ESL classroom?

- What are the most common error correcting strategies used by teachers in the ESL classroom?

## **1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Second language learning has been a topic of much study over the years. This following section consists of a recollection of some of the theories and ideas proposed by scholars through time.

### **1.1 Factors in Language Learning**

Rubio and Martínez (2012) identify which factors influence language learning and divide them in four different categories: (1) individual category, (2) linguistic category, (3) social category and (4) education category.

First, the *individual category* includes factors related to the innate characteristics of each person, such as age, gender, personality, aptitude, intelligence and so on. Not everybody shares the same level of skills and competences, and their personal context will have different influences on their learning.

With the second one, the *linguistic category*, comes the debate of whether the linguistic proximity between tongues makes it easier to learn a language. For North Europeans, whose languages are of Germanic origins, learning English comes easier; the same as for Spanish speakers with other romance languages such as Portuguese, Italian, or French. This theory helps explain the percentages of English speakers mentioned above.

The *social category* includes factors like economic development, budget for education, culture, history, social customs of the country, etc. There is a direct correlation between the money employed on education and the level of language learning: the higher the budget is, the more actions are taken, and if better measures were taken by politicians in the area of education, there would be better results. The number of immigrants or foreign inhabitants in a country is also an important factor. If there are more opportunities for a multicultural context, as happens in tourist areas, for instance, the native population will foster a higher motivation and will have more chances to speak English, fomented by their communicative and commercial needs. Regarding sociocultural factors, in Spain, there was a delay to the introduction of English, and part of the population has always seen this

tongue as an imperialist invader, due to political ideologies (Rubio & Martinez, 2012:147). However, as English has gradually kept globalizing, an instrumental interest in the language has grown, making it a great asset for those people looking for a job. Furthermore, because of the wide extension of the Spanish language around the world, there is not an imperative need for its speakers to learn a second language (L2), as it is the case in countries like Luxembourg, Sweden, Norway, Finland, etc.; whose native languages are much smaller in comparison, making it necessary for their inhabitants to learn English in order to be able to communicate abroad.

Finally, and most relevant to this research, is the *education category*, which refers to the following factors: number of hours of instruction received, teacher formation, classroom methodologies and textbooks or other resources. It is logical to think that the more hours the student receives, the more they will learn, and the earlier the learning process begins, the better it will be. However, it has been proven that quality is more important than quantity. In fact, Spanish students receive almost the same number of hours of English as their Swedish counterparts – 790 and 800 hours, respectively (Eurydice, 2003, as cited in Rubio & Martínez, 2012:145), Furthermore, Greeks receive fewer hours than the French – 657 versus 828 hours – and contradictorily, have a higher percentage of English speakers. Also, it is recommended to start the language learning earlier in the children's school trajectory, but there are countries that start relatively late, as is the case in Sweden, where they start around eight years of age, in contrast to Spanish pupils, who start as early as three years old. So, if quality is more important than quantity, what does quality depend on? Rubio and Martínez (2012:146) emphasize two key factors regarding quality of education: teacher training and classroom methodologies.

### **Teacher instruction in Spain**

Rebolledo (2015) conducted a contrastive study that compared teacher instruction systems from five different European countries. Regarding Spain, she described the relevant factors about teacher training, dividing them in five sections (as cited in Villasante, 2015): (1) access and requirements, (2) duration of the initial instruction, (3) curriculum contents, (4) practical instruction and (5) assessment and level accreditation.



The access to initial teacher instruction programs in the EU usually requires specific credentials which prove that the candidates have passed certain levels of secondary education. In Spain, when a student finishes high school, there is a general exam to be taken, *Selectividad* or *Ev.A.U.* (University Access Tests), which lets them access any degree, depending on the grade they receive. Education degrees generally require the minimum grade, so many of the students that end up in teacher formation do so because they could not get into their first choice of studies.

Secondly, regarding the duration of the initial formation, Rebolledo's study (2015) points out that there is no homogeneous organization in Europe. A decade ago, teacher instruction in Spain was carried out in three years, but nowadays the degree has a duration of four years for primary school teachers, and five for secondary education teachers. In other countries, such as Finland, the instruction takes more than five years.

As for curricular content, in most EU countries, the initial teacher instruction consists of mandatory core subjects, general education studies and a period of practical experiences; to which other specific programs can be added, such as education in technology and communication, management and administration of educative centers or special needs. In the case of Spain, teacher training is oriented towards a somewhat outdated model of assimilation of scientific, didactic, and professional contents, "although with obvious gaps in the interaction between theory and practice" ("*aunque con evidentes lagunas en la interacción entre ciencia y práctica*") (Rebolledo, 2015, as cited in Villasante, 2015:1, translated by me). Along their study trajectory, individuals studying to become primary teachers must choose a specialization section between Physical Education, Musical Education, Special Education and English Language. Therefore, it is necessary for the latter to partake in mandatory postgraduate programs.

Practical training in Spain figures as one more subject in the study plan. Usually, there are two practical periods of different duration (between two and five months), which take place during the last two years of the degree. The students are tutored by university professors as well as experienced mentors in the school where the internship takes place, who assess the student's learning process and evaluate whether the objectives are being reached.

Finally, regarding the final assessment and level of accreditation of teacher instruction programs in Spain, a primary teacher is considered qualified at the end of the bachelor's degree. However, a secondary teacher is required to take a postgraduate program, namely a master's degree, in order to be able to practice the profession.

### **Classroom methodologies**

Several methodologies have been used in Spanish ESL classrooms, depending on the government mandate that was being followed at the time. Approaches such as the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) or the Grammar-Translation Method, popular in the first half of the twentieth century, were left behind. The Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLT) ended up being the most popular in recent decades, next to, and even sometimes combined with the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) method. TBLT is based on the idea that language as a means of communication is best learnt through experience, through the performance of communicative tasks. The classes with this method follow a series of tasks designed to imitate as close as possible real-life situations that the students could encounter.

Even though some teaching methods are more acclaimed than others in European schools, Ur (2013:469) adds that specific methods are never fully adopted by school or education systems, since teachers always end up “diluting” them according to local needs and preferences. Moreover, Kumaravadivelu (2006, as cited in Ur, 2013:469) suggests that methods are merely prescriptions made by theorists who are not present in the classrooms.

Therefore, he advocates for teachers to reject those approaches recommended by theorists and base their teaching approach (namely, *situated methodologies*) on educational preferences of their students, in order for the results to improve. Situated methodologies, thus, take and combine ideas from different theories of teaching and learning, and “include, and possibly even prioritize, topics such as motivation and interest, (...), the nature of teacher mediation, classroom dynamics, and so on: issues that teachers of all subjects are concerned with.” (Ur, 2013:470)

In the end, however, no matter the method used, and how well it is applied in the classroom, language learners will always produce some errors. But are errors truly a negative thing, or can they be used as assets in the process of learning a second language?

## 1.2 Error Analysis

Before diving into error analysis, a clear definition of ‘error’ must be made clear. According to Norrish (1987, as cited in Hasyim, 2002), an error is a systematic deviation that occurs when the learner has not learned something and consistently gets it wrong. On the other hand, Lennon (1991) defines error in a language learning context as “a linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers’ native speaker counterparts” (p.182).

The study of Error Analysis (EA) constitutes an essential part in the area of language learning and includes a long list of representative authors such as Krashen, Corder or Selinker, among others. Corder (1967), one of the most notable researchers in the field of error analysis, claimed that errors play a crucial part in the linguistic development, since they represent the discrepancies between the grammar rules of the learner’s “transitional competence”, and those of the target language. He also introduced the idea that learners have an “inbuilt syllabus” that determines in what order grammar is acquired, and that it is through the study of learner errors that we find clues about it.

Chomsky (1965) established the difference between competence and performance. He stated that “We thus make a fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language) and *performance* (the actual use of language in concrete situations)” (1965, p. 4). Based on this, Corder (1967) makes a distinction between the commonly used term *mistake*, and the concept of error. According to Corder, an error is a problem of competence, a systematic deviation from the rules that govern a foreign language. If the learner still lacks the necessary knowledge to correct themselves, he or she will not be able to do so. In contrast, mistakes portray a problem with performance. They are specific, unsystematic deviations that occur even when the speaker knows the rules of the language, but result from “chance circumstances”, namely slips of the tongue, or factors that affect the individual, such as distractions, their mood, fatigue, etc. Speakers can thus correct themselves after making a mistake, because they are aware of the rules that they failed to apply the first time around.

It may seem like errors ought to be considered a negative part of the learner process, but it is quite the opposite. Corder (1967) defended the idea that learner’s errors are equally

helpful to teachers, researchers and students: first, errors show teachers how the student's learning is progressing, and what is left to be learned or taught; second, through the study and analysis of errors, researchers can find out how the language process forms and develops, and it helps them develop new useful strategies; and finally, errors help learners, enabling them to follow a process of trial and error, to learn through testing hypothesis about the target language.

### **1.3 Interlanguage**

Second language acquisition includes all the processes – conscious and unconscious – through which a foreign language learner develops the ability to apply structures and linguistic forms to communicate in said language. This development follows a natural order of acquisition. In order to understand the rule system that the learner applies, it is fundamental to analyze the concept of *interlanguage* (IL).

Interlanguage is a term that was coined by Selinker in 1972. It describes the linguistic system of a second language learner, in each of the stages of linguistic knowledge through which he or she goes in the learning process. Interlanguage is thus characterized as an individual system, different for each student, as it mediates between the systems of his mother tongue and those of the target language. It is also an autonomous process – governed by its own patterned rules – as well as systematic and variable, with a coherent set of rules that in turn are not constant. Furthermore, the process of interlanguage is in constant evolution, as it constitutes the successive stages of approximation to the target language (Pérez, 2017). It is not a random collection of unsystematic errors, but it is not a language of its own either – neither a native nor a target language. “It is a separate transitional linguistic system that can be described in terms of evolving linguistic patterns and rules, and explained in terms of specific cognitive and social linguistic processes that shape it.” (Tarone, 2018:1).

In Corder's words, Selinker came to the idea of interlanguage believing that “the learner's language was a hybrid between his L1 and the target language” (1981:2). Most errors could be blamed on the process of transfer from one language to another, but after researchers started to collect data from learners who were not receiving a formal instruction – mainly children – there was a rather small amount of transfer errors. Moreover, these

errors were found to be independent of the nature of the learner's mother tongue, and also depended on the stage of development in which the learner was in the moment of producing them.

The process of interlanguage is usually unconscious. The learner is not aware of the linguistic rules and characteristics he or she is using, often thinking that they are the same in both native and target language. They may be able to describe those they have learned in the classroom, but these are not the interlanguage rules they actually use when focused on meaning.

Another important element of interlanguage is fossilization. When a language learner keeps committing the same error but is capable of conveying the intended message despite it, he or she grows accustomed to it, incorporating the error in his grammatical repertoire as a rule, "fossilizing" it as if it were a correct form in the target language. According to Selinker, the main reason for fossilization is the adult second language learners' tendency to use more general cognitive processes, or the "*latent psychological structure*", instead of the Chomskyan language-specific Universal Grammar, which he called "*latent language structure*" (Lenneberg, 1967, as cited in Tarone, 2018:2). This latent psychological structure is shaped into linguistic systems through the following five cognitive processes: (1) native language transfer, (2) over-generalization of target language rules, (3) transfer of training, (4) strategies of communication and (5) strategies of learning.

Transfer (also referred to as *crosslinguistic influence*) is a popular topic of study, and explores how languages – native (NL), interlanguage (IL) and target (TL) – influence one another. It is a process that occurs selectively: some elements are transferred from the NL to the IL, but others are not. This is something that many researchers have tried studying. Tarone (2018:5) raises the following questions: "What gets transferred?" "Can we predict in advance which characteristics will influence an IL and which ones will not?" She claims that the likelihood of fossilization increases when transfer is combined with other influences, like markedness factors, learning strategies or transfer of training.

#### **1.4 Errors in Language Learning**

There are two schools of thought in the area of learner's errors. First, there are those who maintain that errors are the products of poor and inadequate teaching techniques: if a

perfect teaching method were to be found, errors would never be committed in the first place. On the other hand, there are others who claim that we already live in an imperfect world, and errors are part of our daily lives. They will always be present, despite our best efforts, and instead of trying to avoid them, we should be employing our energy on techniques dedicated to dealing with those errors once they have occurred.

Until the late 60s, researchers studying errors in a second language learning held a behavioristic point of view, namely that learning merely consisted of acquiring a set of new language habits. Therefore, proficiency was subjected to the frequency with which the learner applied his own mother tongue's habits to the target language. All errors were thus ascribed to *interference* of the mother tongue on the second language. Consequently, most error analysis research at the time was devoted to comparing the mother tongue and the target language in order to predict or explain the errors made by learners of a specific language background. Although there was a long list of errors that could not be explained in this way, there was essentially only one technique used to deal with every single language deviation, no matter their origin: constant drilling and exercise. Understandably, not all errors could be solved, predicted, or dealt with properly with this method.

Over the years since then, there has been an important shift of emphasis in language teaching, moving closer toward a more functional system applicable to communicative purposes. Nowadays, there is a greater awareness that languages are acquired better under natural circumstances, through conversation, with the need of attempting to communicate rather than simply learning the grammatical rules by heart. The mixture of the learners' own conceptions and the new information provided to them from the outside, therefore helps them follow this natural learning process. But these conceptions that they have may differ from the information taught, creating a gap in the content to be learned. Despite this situation being completely normal in the learning process, traditional teaching and learning methods have created an environment that fosters negative attitudes towards this gap, thus giving errors a negative connotation. Learners, therefore, begin to see errors as something to be avoided, and decide to stick to safe choices instead of taking risks, which, in spite of making room for more errors to be made, would also help them advance quicker in the learning process (Antlova, Chudy & Peng, 2016).

Based on the fact that learners will always make errors in the classroom, a polemic debate in L2 didactics revolves around the question of how these errors should be corrected. Frustration is one of the most common emotions that teachers have towards errors, especially when they reoccur constantly. But students feel it too, not only towards themselves because of the constant error making, but also towards the teacher and their ways of dealing with the errors they make (Livingstone, 2015). According to Livingstone, both teachers and students have their own perceptions about error correction strategies, and they are not always the same, a mismatch which can create conflicts in the classroom.

As stated earlier in this essay, errors are a crucial part of the language acquiring process (Corder, 1967). They serve as a resource that not only shows how successfully is the learning developing but also helps with the design of pedagogic materials and didactic strategies, in a process of, as the name indicates, trial and error. In Livingstone's (2015:2) words, "without knowledge of learner errors, it would be virtually impossible to design and implement effective error correction strategies". Antlova, Chudy & Peng (2016:2) claim that "errors and imperfections should be regarded a temporary state which needs to be overcome, not obeyed", and thus, as many authors before them, they too see errors as assets, as learning opportunities.

A good teacher will use all strategies that are available to them to make sure their students accomplish all the objectives of the learning process. If the learners do achieve these objectives, i.e., the learning has been effective, it means that the instruction itself has been effective (Biggs & Tang, 2011, as cited in Livingstone, 2015:2). There is no difference in the language classroom. Once students and teachers realize that committing errors is a natural part of the language learning process, they will stop resisting them, and the teacher will be able to focus on specific teaching techniques and strategies to help students eliminate, or simply deal with their language errors (Livingstone, 2015).

"If learning is considered as an active process that requires practice for both procedural as well as conceptual learning, classroom learning environments should encourage students to explore and discuss their (mis-)conceptions." (Tulis, 2013:56)

It is still a mystery whether second language comes from a natural sequence, but if it could be established how the L2 is gradually built up by the learner, then the materials and

structural syllabus and class methods could be organized in an optimal way, to benefit both students and teachers, and foster a perfect learning environment.

### **1.5 Error Correction**

Over the years, there have been many opponents to error correction. These authors claim that errors are dangerous to language learning, and that they slow the learning process down. Therefore, they recommend paying the least amount of attention to errors as possible, hoping that if ignored, errors will interfere less with the learning process (Krashen, 1994; Truscott, 1999; Krashen, 2003; as cited in Livingstone, 2015:8). Contrarily, there are also many authors that defend errors, who declare that error correction is a crucial part of L2 learning, and that under the correct circumstances, it impacts positively in the learning process (Ammar & Spada, 2006; Azar, 2007; as cited in Livingstone, 2015:8).

Correcting errors is never an easy process. Depending on the strategies used by the teacher, it is an experience that can provide the students with anxiety, embarrassment, and frustration, doing more harm than good to the learning process. Different studies (Schulz, 2001; Rauber & Gil, 2004, Yoshida, 2008; as cited in Livingstone, 2015:8) show that student attitudes, motivation and opinions toward the teacher are heavily influenced by how their errors are dealt with in class.

Our daily lives are full of mistakes and errors that we want to correct and try not to repeat in the future. But sometimes these deviations are unconscious, so before we can correct them, the individual needs to be made aware of the errors that he or she made. The same happens in the L2 learning process: errors are common, and it should be as natural to correct them, so the first step the teacher must follow is to point out the errors, to make learners aware of them (Ellis, 2009). However, before pointing out the errors, the teacher must consider certain variables – such as individual differences, motivation levels, self-confidence, etc. – to decide which strategies to follow to make the learner aware of their mistakes, and consequently, correcting the errors.

#### **1.5.1 Five Questions About Error Correction**

Back in 1978, James Hendrickson started a study on what he called *corrective feedback* (CF). What he wanted was to answer the questions *when, which, how, and who* of the error



correction process in the language learning classroom. Up to this day, these questions are left without a clear answer, and are still studied by researchers in the field of L2 learning. The aim of this section of the essay is to further explore all five of Hendrickson's (1978) questions, which are the following: (1) Should learner errors be corrected? (2) If so, when should learner errors be corrected? (3) Which learner errors should be corrected? (4) How should learner errors be corrected? and (5) Who should correct learner errors?

### **1) Should learner errors be corrected?**

As stated earlier, this question is one of the biggest dilemmas regarding the topic of errors in the L2 classroom. Hendrickson (1978) is supportive of error correction, claiming that it improves learners' competence in the target language in great measure. On the other hand, authors such as Krashen and Truscott (1994 and 1999 respectively, as cited in Livingstone, 2015) are against it, believing that error correction and grammar instruction are unpleasant classroom activities that hinder the L2 learning process. Despite opponents, most studies incline towards the position for error correction, and explain that it would be harmful to the learning process not to deal with the learners' errors (Rauber & Gil, 2004, as cited in Livingstone, 2015).

### **2) When should learner errors be corrected?**

Learner's anxiety and motivation are important factors in error making and error correction, and closely related to the question of *when to correct*. High performance students, who usually have lower levels of anxiety and more motivation, are more open to error correction than low achiever students (Livingstone, 2015). There is uncertainty about when should errors be corrected, and Yoshida (2008) affirms that it depends on what error correction strategy is being used, but also highlights other factors to take into account, such as time constraints or the learners' ability to process public feedback.

### **3) Which learner errors should be corrected?**

The third of Hendrickson's questions has also raised some debate. Should all errors be corrected? The truth is, if every single error were corrected, the class would be continuously interrupted, making it very difficult for students to have coherent L2 speech acts, and thus, slowing down the acquisition of their communicative competence. Hendrickson's viewpoint is that only some errors should be corrected and claims that when

the teacher lets some errors pass, interrupting students less often, learners have more motivation to communicate easier. So, which errors should be corrected, and which should be ignored?

The purpose of L2 learning is to achieve a proficient communicative competence in the target language, and it is only natural for learners to make errors in their productions. However, most of their errors have no importance in the communicative act as a whole, since they are able to get their message across with the native speakers of the L2 usually understanding them thanks to context. Therefore, Hendrickson (1978) states that the most important errors to correct are those which hinder the communicative act and impede others to understand what the learner is trying to say. Furthermore, teachers should also correct systematic errors: those that the learner keeps making repeatedly.

#### **4) How should learner errors be corrected?**

Due to the diversity of types of errors that L2 learners can make, there are several strategies for teachers to use to correct them. Not all errors can be corrected in the same way. Suzuki (2004) makes a distinction between explicit and implicit error correction strategies, highlighting the efficacy of the former. An implicit approach, as its name suggests, gives the students space to figure their error out by themselves, and explicit correction requires the help from the teachers to make them aware. Depending on the severity of the error, the teacher will choose either position, but implicit correction is not always recommended, because it makes it difficult for teachers to discern whether the error has been successfully noticed by the student, and thus, successfully corrected.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) propose the following six strategies of error correction: (1) direct explicit correction, (2) recast, (3) clarification requests, (4) metalinguistic feedback, (5) elicitation, and (6) repetition.

*Direct explicit correction* happens when the teacher directly produces the correct form, clearly indicating the student that what he or she said was incorrect (e.g. “you should say... instead of...”).

The teacher *recasts* by reformulating the student’s sentence, or part of it, with the correct form of the error made. This method is characterized as an implicit correction, since

the teacher does not specifically refer to it as an error, but simply repeats the correct form back at the student.

*Clarification requests* consist of different questions that the teacher asks the learner, usually to make them repeat whatever they said with other words, either to make more sense of what they are trying to say, or to make them realize the error committed (e.g. “what do you mean?”).

With *metalinguistic feedback*, the teacher corrects the errors by providing the student with information or comments about the rules of the L2, usually grammar (e.g. “adjectives go before nouns”). Metalinguistic feedback can sometimes be found in the form of questions (e.g. “where do adjectives go, before or after the noun?”).

*Elicitation* is subdivided in three different techniques: the first one consists of the teacher repeating the incorrect utterance but stopping mid-sentence to have students complete the “blank” with the correct form. Second, teachers may ask questions to elicit correct forms (e.g. “how do we say this in English?”). Note that these cannot be yes/no questions, as those correspond to metalinguistic feedback. Third, teachers can elicit a correct answer by simply asking students to reformulate their utterances.

The last strategy proposed by Lyster and Ranta is *Repetition*. As its name indicates, this method consists of the repetition of the student’s error, most times adjusting the intonation in order to highlight the error.

Though they are the most common, these six strategies of error correction are not the only ones that can be used. Lyster and Ranta talk of an extra category, *multiple feedback* which is a combination of two or more of the previously stated methods. Depending on many factors such as the type of error, the class, the students, etc. the teacher might make up their own correction strategies, or interpret existing methods in their own personal way, some of them being more successful than others.

*Codeswitching*, or any kind of use of the learner’s native tongue, has become a rather common practice in second language classrooms, to avoid misunderstandings and to ensure a complete acquisition of concepts. However, depending on the teaching methodologies being used, these strategies are not always recommended. Since traditional language teaching methods were more focused on linguistic immersion, the use of the learner’s native tongue has been frowned upon for years, but nowadays, as the globalization

movement has grown significantly all over the world, and interculturality is becoming more and more common, codeswitching is consequently being gradually applied more in the classrooms.

### **5) Who should correct learner errors?**

Teachers are responsible for their student's acquisition of the L2. It is their job to "provide data and examples, and where necessary, to offer explanations and descriptions and, more importantly, verification of the learner's hypothesis (i.e., correction)" about the target language (Corder 1973:336, as cited in Hendrickson, 1978:395). They are the ones who correct most of the students' errors but, are they the only ones who can? Teachers are humans too, and therefore, they cannot be aware of absolutely every one of the mistakes that happen throughout the class. Self-correction and peer-correction are two situations that happen rather often in the learning process.

Self-correction is an indirect type of feedback, where students notice the errors by themselves and correct them, sometimes through some help from the teachers, who give them clues or options to make the correction.

Peer-correction has proved to be quite an effective method of error correction, as it involves other learners in the learning and teaching process (Ramírez & Guillén, 2018). Classmates give and receive feedback to each other, enhancing students' positive characteristics such as cooperation, interaction, involvement, and motivation. The learning responsibility is shared, which shows learners that they are all equally important in the learning process. Unfortunately, there are also negative outcomes of this method, since if it is not managed properly, there is more space for peer judgement and ridicule. Furthermore, as the teacher is the expert in the class, some students may not trust their peers' feedback to be accurate (Kunwongse, 2013).

### **1.6 Common errors in English by Spanish learners**

There are multiple types of errors in language learning: lexical, grammatical, syntactical, phonological, etc. This section will present the most common errors found in written productions of English, those that belong, therefore, to the categories except phonological. They were collected from previous research in the subject (Andreu, 2016; Moore & Marzano, 1979; Serrano, 2013) as well as online articles (Vincent, 2015).

### 1. Pronouns

Spanish is a gendered language. This means that not only pronouns, but adjectives, nouns and determiners have a grammatical gender (i.e., there is a binary system where the same word has two variations: one in the masculine and another in the feminine form). This way, most words in the sentence agree with each other. For example, *ella está contenta*: she is happy. The adjective *happy* shows a feminine gender, so there is no confusion in pronoun use. Contrastively, English words barely denote gender; there are some words, mostly nouns, with lexical gender (i.e. a different word for each gender: *boy* and *girl*), but only pronouns have a grammatical gender.

One of the most common errors made by Spanish speakers is to mix up English gender pronouns (Andreu, 2016), because the word that comes after is not gendered and thus, agrees with either form, masculine or feminine. Therefore, the sentences *she is happy*, and *he is happy* are almost identical, making novel learners confused about which pronoun to use.

This same problem can also be found with possessive adjectives. In this case, it is in Spanish where the word is neutral in gender, *su*. One can say *su libro* and depending on the context it can mean either *her book* or *his book*.

### 2. Prepositions

The prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* translate to *en* in Spanish, so it can be understood why their mix up is a common error for English language learners. Sometimes this confusion can become a bigger problem, as there are situations where the use of a wrong preposition can change the meaning of the sentence. For example: *The teacher shouted to the boy (to get his attention)* versus *The teacher shouted at the boy (because he was angry with him)* (Vincent, 2015a). Sometimes, due to this confusion with prepositions, students may decide to eliminate the preposition from the sentence altogether (Moore & Marzano, 1979).

### 3. Adjectives

Generally, adjectives in Spanish go after the noun they qualify (*un libro interesante*), opposite to English, where adjectives precede the noun (*an interesting book*). Learners, especially beginners, are therefore prone to committing the error of misplacing the

adjective (Andreu, 2016). Furthermore, there are times when the position of the adjective in Spanish changes the meaning of the sentence, making it necessary to use a different word in English. This way, *un gran hombre* (a great man) is not the same as *un hombre grande* (a big man).

#### 4. Articles

The articles (*a, an, the*) are sometimes omitted in Spanish, so there are times when students disregard them in English as well. For example, before nouns that denote professions (*she is teacher*). When they do use them, they frequently do it incorrectly, mostly before uncountable nouns, as in *he has a chalk*.

#### 5. Verbs

Verbs are a rather tricky part when learning a language, with many levels to study and analyze. A common error that Spanish learners of English make is related to auxiliary verbs. In order to form interrogative and negative sentences, (as well as compound tenses or the passive voice), English makes use of an auxiliary verb: *do, have, be*. However, these kinds of verbs are not necessary in Spanish: negative sentence formation consists of simply adding a negator “*no*” in front of the verb, and interrogative sentences are exactly the same as the positive form, just between question marks. Thus, adding the auxiliary is something that Spanish learners of English have difficulties with. As a result, they might omit them, producing sentences such as “*you drink water?*” or “*I not like this film*”. When this error happens in the formation of negative and interrogative sentences, like these two cases, the problem is not serious, because the speaker gets the intended meaning across. On the other hand, the issue is bigger when it comes with the formation of compound tenses, since most times, the auxiliary is the verb that indicates the tense of the sentence. If a speaker produces the sentence “*The girl crying*”, with the auxiliary verb omitted, the listener cannot be sure about the tense, not knowing if the girl is crying now or was crying in the past (Gulö & Rahmawelly, 2018).

Spanish learners of English also have other difficulties with verb tenses. A popular error is to confuse the present with the past forms, and vice versa. Moore and Marzano (1979) claim that this apparent grammatical error is actually a phonological one, and they

blame it on the consonant clusters. Most verb past forms are formed by the addition of suffixes (i.e. *-ed*), namely consonant clusters that do not exist in Spanish. Learners omit these clusters (*walked* may become *walk*), destroying the morphological distinction between past and present.

#### 6. Concord

Another common error with verbs is related with the third person singular forms in the present simple. Despite having a highly inflected language, as is Spanish, as a mother tongue, learners often have trouble with the inflexion “-s” of the third person (e.g. *he plays*, *he doesn't play*). Vincent (2015a) theorizes that this error occurs because the suffix carries no real meaning, or because in Spanish it is the second person which is inflected with a “-s” – *haces* (you do), *vienes* (you come). Another reason could be that contrarily to Spanish, English verb conjugations do not vary in person, so students may simply be forgetting to add the “-s” at the end of verbs for the third person.

#### 7. Subject omission

The omission of the subject is a common practice in the Spanish language. In these situations, sentences are presented without a noun or pronoun to take the role of subject. Despite this lack of an explicit subject, it can most times be pragmatically or referentially inferred from the contextual meaning of the sentence or the text, as well as helped by the other words that make up the sentence. For instance, verbs in Spanish are conjugated to disclose not only the tense and time of the action, but also the person who is carrying it out. The verb in *(yo) veo la televisión* (**I** watch television) will differ from *(nosotros) vemos la televisión* (**we** watch television), and thus, since the verb already shows who is doing the action, there is no need for an explicit subject, contrarily to English, where verbs are not modified from person to person.

Subject omission is therefore a common error, but not only in these cases. It is also very common for it to occur with impersonal sentences. For example, when describing the weather, there is no specific subject doing the action, but sentences in English require one at all times, so the pronoun *it* takes the role: *it is raining*, whereas in Spanish there is no subject at all: *está lloviendo*. This difference makes the students produce grammatically wrong sentences like *is raining*.

## 8. Interference from the mother tongue

As stated in previous sections of this paper, native languages have a great influence when learning a L2. It is common, especially for beginner language learners, to carry out thought processes in their native language, and consequently translating to the target language, since they lack sufficient knowledge to be able to think directly in the L2. This situation makes errors of interference appear more easily. Literal translation, and false friends are some examples of errors of interference.

Spanish speakers will often produce sentences like “*he **has** fifteen years old*”, “*I **have** hunger*” or “*I **am** agree*”, translating literally by using the verbs they would use in their mother tongue. The use of the correct word is sometimes difficult because there are not always grammatical or logical rules for the collocation of words, it simply is like that, and the student must learn it by heart.

The term *false friend* refers to those words in a second or foreign language that either looks (is spelled), or sounds (is pronounced) like another word in the speaker’s mother tongue, but neither of them sharing the same meaning. This is confusing to learners, who might use a word thinking it means something, when in reality it means something completely different. Some common examples of Spanish-English false friends are (Vincent, 2015):

- *embarazada* – not *embarrassed* but *pregnant*
- *molestar* – not *molest* but *bother*
- *bombero* – not *bomber* but *firefighter*

## **2. THE STUDY**

The following is a qualitative and descriptive research about errors in second language learning. As mentioned in the beginning of the paper, the main aim of the study is to identify the opinions that Spanish teachers and learners of English as a Second language have regarding errors in the classroom, and compare them in order to find out whether teaching methodologies and practices should change and be adapted towards a better management of errors in the educational setting.



## 2.1 Method and sample

The data for this study was gathered through two surveys created with Google Forms. The first questionnaire was targeted at teachers of English as a Second Language in Spain, and the second, at their students. Both surveys consisted of fifteen questions each in different formats: open answer, multiple choice and Likert scale (in the students' questionnaire from 1 to 4 and in the teachers', from 1 to 6), to fit the questions better and to make answers more specific and concise. The complete questionnaires are available for the reader in the Appendix section, at the very end of this paper.

Both questionnaires were distributed with the help of social media platforms and email, as well as posted in a webpage called *tusclasesparticulares*, which is a Spanish online network of private tutoring services, where both teachers and students post advertisements either offering or seeking classes. Participants were also encouraged to send the links of the forms to other acquaintances, colleagues, family members or friends who could fit in the profile of respondents (teachers of English in Spain, or students of English between the age of nine and eighteen).

In the end, one hundred and sixty answers to the questionnaires were received in total, eighty from the teachers' questionnaire, and another eighty from the students'.

The sample was thus divided into two sections: teachers and students. There were no special requirements for the teachers' participation: their age, nationality and years of experience were not considered important variables for the purposes of the study. On the other hand, the age of students was restricted to that of school attendance: from nine (younger participants may not have understood the questions well) to eighteen years old.

The age of the teachers ranged from nineteen to sixty-six, with most of them being in their twenties; and their countries of origin were quite varied: Spain, UK, USA, Argentina, Australia, Ireland, Mexico, Germany and Colombia. Regarding their mother tongue, there was a majority of native speakers of Spanish (68.8%), followed by English (16.3%), some Catalan (2.5%), another participant answered German, and another, Portuguese. Interestingly, some participants claimed to be bilingual: a 7,5% of participants considered both English and Spanish as mother tongues, and 2.5% did the same with Spanish and Catalan. Finally, regarding years of experience, a 30% of teachers carry ten or more years,

21.2% five to ten, 26.3% two to five years, and 22,5% have been working as English teachers for less than two years.

Moreover, the age of the student participants ranged from nine to eighteen years old, and their nationalities were mostly Spanish (85%), but there were others from Venezuela, Cuba, Uruguay, Mexico, and the USA. All the participants answered Spanish to be their mother tongue.

### 3. DISCUSSION

In this section, the data gathered from the questionnaires will be analyzed, and the results will be discussed.

#### 3.1 Results and data analysis

All of the answers given both by the teachers and students in their respective questionnaires were studied, analyzed and compared. These results can be found in the following section. The complete questionnaires, as they were presented to the participants, are attached in the Appendix section at the end of this paper.

##### **Errors are something negative that should be avoided**

The first question in the teachers' questionnaire is very general, to make sure whether the global opinion toward errors in the classroom is a positive or a negative one. It was devised with the Likert scale system: the participants had the option to choose from one of six levels of agreement with the statement *Errors are something negative that should be avoided* (number 1 being "I strongly agree" and 6 being "I strongly disagree").

The answers are presented in the following graph:

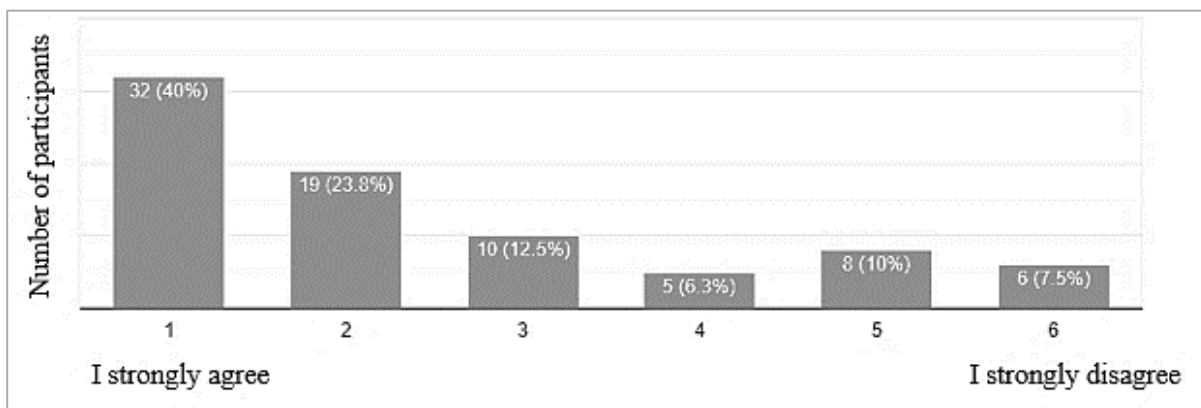


Figure 1: *Errors are something negative that should be avoided*

It can be observed that, among teachers there is a predominantly negative opinion towards errors in the classroom. 76.3% of participants believe, to a greater or lesser extent, that errors should be avoided, and that they are not beneficial for the learning process. The reason for this may be that they blame themselves, they fear that they are not doing their job as well as they should, and if the teaching method was adequate, students would never commit any errors in the first place.

This negative opinion contrasts strongly with the main ideas of most theories of error analysis that were presented in the beginning of this paper, which defended the idea of errors being nothing short of beneficial for the L2 learning. If the reader can recall from the theoretical background, Corder (1967) claimed that errors play a crucial role in linguistic development, and not only show whether the progress of the learning process is being successful or not, but also act as an important asset for the instructors in the teaching process.

In the student's survey, this question was formulated differently, worded in a way that was easier for them to understand: *If you make a mistake in class, what do you prefer doing?* The participants were given two answer options: (a) *Ignore it*, and (b) *Correct it*. The majority of respondents (92.5%) would rather correct it than ignore it (7.5%). This shows an initial positive attitude towards errors and error correction in the classroom, which is opposite to that of the teachers, and agrees with Error Analysis theorists' claims.

### **Most common errors**

A list of the most common ten errors (as stated in section 1.6 of this paper, collected from previous studies such as Andreu, 2016; Moore & Marzano, 1979; Serrano, 2013 and Vincent, 2015) was provided to the teachers in the questionnaire, and they were asked to choose which four were the most common that their students make in the classroom.

As seen in Figure 2, the most common error made in the Spanish ESL classroom, according to the teachers, is *literal translation*. This is of no surprise: as stated in previous sections of this paper, interference is a frequent phenomenon in second language acquisition. Depending on their level of proficiency, learners may carry out their thought processes in their native tongue and then translate them to English, and even though this strategy can sometimes result successful, it is not always the case.

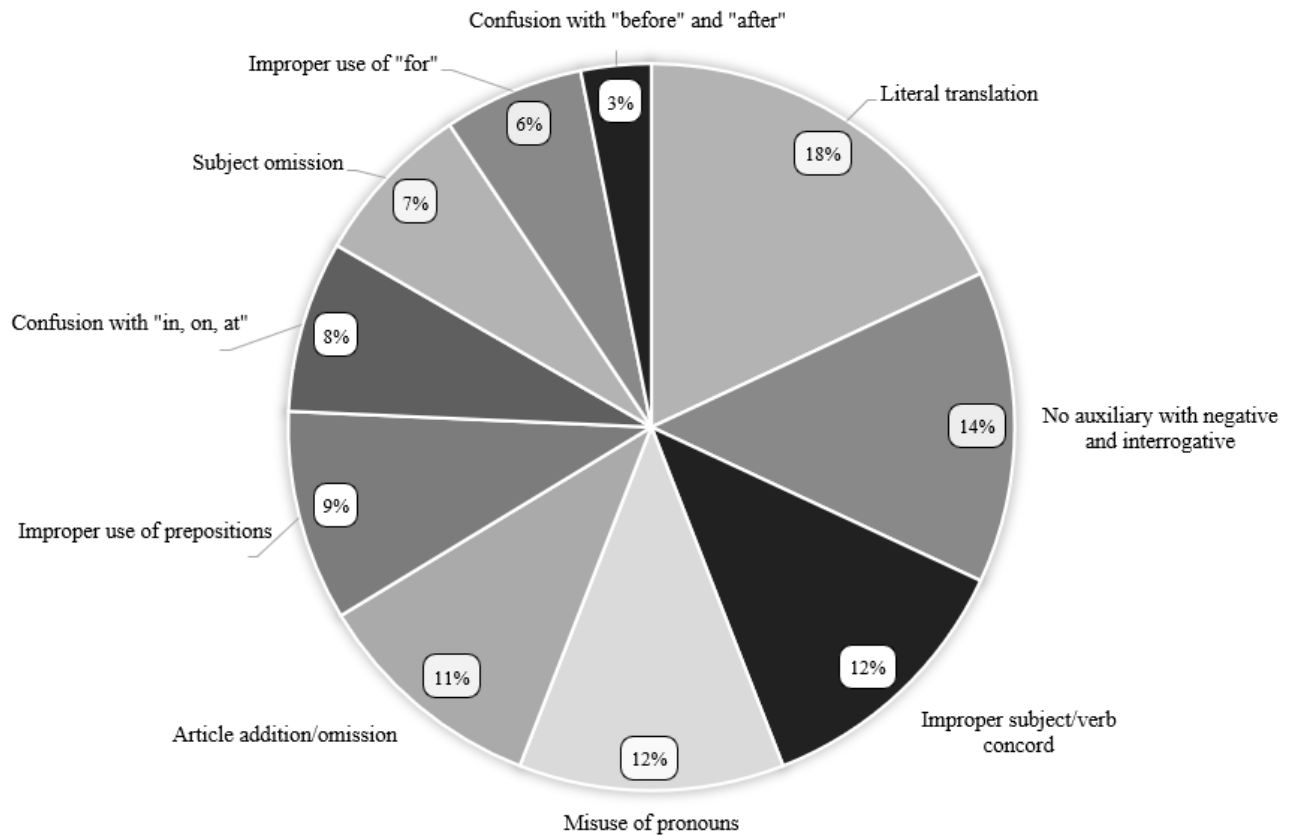


Figure 2: Common Errors

Forgetting to add the *auxiliary verb* in negative and interrogative sentences appears to be quite frequent as well. As explained in section 1.6 (Common errors in English by Spanish speakers), these types of verbs are not needed in Spanish for the formation of negative and interrogative sentences, so the reason for this omission is an evident interference from Spanish.

*Concord* errors and the *misuse of pronouns* share the third position in the list of common errors. On one hand, verb conjugation is one of the most difficult areas in the learning of a second language, and since English does not have many variations in this area, learners are quick to overlook the rules and use an incorrect form. And, on the other hand, pronouns can be tricky for learners. It is usual, especially for beginners, to use the form *he* to refer to a woman, and vice versa, and to confuse object and possessive forms.

Participants were also given an extra option to answer this question, with which they had the chance of adding other types of errors that they commonly encounter in their

classrooms. Most of the extra answers provided were about errors related to *verb tenses*: “Speaking of past situations with present simple tense”, “wrong use of the Present Perfect”, or “Present perfect vs past simple”. Other answers mentioned phonological and pronunciation errors, but since this research focuses mostly on grammatical and syntactic errors, they were disregarded.

### **Mother Tongue interference**

When participants were asked about their opinions on interference of the Spanish language in their students learning of English, a 71% of teachers agreed that their students’ errors are *most times* caused by native tongue interference. A 19% answered *sometimes*, while 10% believe that it is *always* the case. As seen in the theoretical background, interference is one of the most recurring reasons for L2 learning errors, because it is common, especially for beginner language learners, to carry out thought processes in their native language, and consequently translating to the target language, since they lack sufficient knowledge to be able to think directly in the L2.

On the other hand, students were asked which language they use most in the English class, to which a 75% answered English, and 25% Spanish. It is not uncommon to hear the Spanish language in ESL classes in Spain, either because of codeswitching strategies such as direct translation, for example, or because of the student’s misbehavior or reluctance to use the target language. The reason for this could be that they are afraid of being judged for making errors, or because they are not motivated enough to want to practice.

To discern the level of native tongue interference, they were also questioned about their thought processes. A 78.8% of participants claim that when they are in class, they think directly in English, whereas 21.2% said that they think in Spanish and then translate to English. Despite this, most students (55%) believe that their mother tongue interferes with their productions in English. This depends, of course, on their level of proficiency in the target language, since they may not possess enough knowledge to carry out cognitive processes in English.

### **Error correction: when, how, who**

There were several questions in the surveys related to the correction of errors. First, participants were asked when they prefer to correct and be corrected. A 72.5% of teachers

would rather wait for students to finish producing their entire utterances before they correct them, and 27.5% prefer to do so instantly as soon as the student makes an error. Learners are of the same opinion: most participants (63.7%) like it better when the teachers let them finish talking, and the rest (36.3%) wish to be corrected the moment they make an error. This situation depends on the error committed, as well as which type of error correcting strategy is being used, but it is clear to see that students feel more comfortable when they are listened to, and not interrupted every time they make a mistake.

Regarding *how* to correct, teachers were asked whether they preferred making the learner aware of their errors in private or in front of the rest of the classmates. A 73.8% of participants favored a mix of the two: sometimes in private and other times in front of everyone else. A 20% answered that they usually correct in front of the entire class, and a 6.2% said that they would rather do it privately, where no one else can hear the correction. Right after this question, they were given space to provide further comments about their answer. These are some of the explanations given:

*Respondent 1:* “By giving them the correction in front of their classmates they get to understand that mistakes are normal and natural and only by trying and failing they will improve their abilities”

*R 2:* “(Because) I don't think that making/correcting a mistake means it's something wrong going around, that's the natural thing to happen, so we don't have to make such a big deal about it, just correct the mistake and move on, and if the case is there are other classmates there listening, they can learn from that mistake as well.”

*R 3:* “If the correction will benefit the whole group, I address it in front of everyone, but if an individual student keeps making the same mistake, then I talk to them on their own to not make a “scene” and possibly draw unwanted attention to them.”

Once again, the students' opinions coincide with those of the teachers. A 46.3% have no preference on how to be corrected: either in front of their classmates or in private is fine with them. A 36.2% favors the former, and the rest (17.5%), the latter. Based on the reasons and explanations provided after their answer, we can see that anxiety and

embarrassment are important factors that play part in the students' opinions on error correction:

R 4: (I prefer to be corrected in private) "Because it makes me feel stupid in the front of the class"

R 5: "I am shy, I would rather prefer to be corrected when there is no people, but that's not possible in many situations so I accepted the fact that it will be in front of my classmates. Always if that doesn't cause possible bullying or jokes among them and it's purely constructive."

In the end, however, most of the students realize that it is better for everyone when the error is corrected in front of others, so they can learn too:

R 6: "I don't mind getting corrected in front of others, and sometimes can help others learn, since I sometimes learn from others' corrections." (sic.)

In fact, the next question in the students' questionnaire was about this. They had to position their agreement with the statement *If the teacher corrects me in front of my classmates, they will learn too*, with a Likert Scale from 1 to 4, where 1 corresponded to *I disagree*, and 4 was *I agree*.

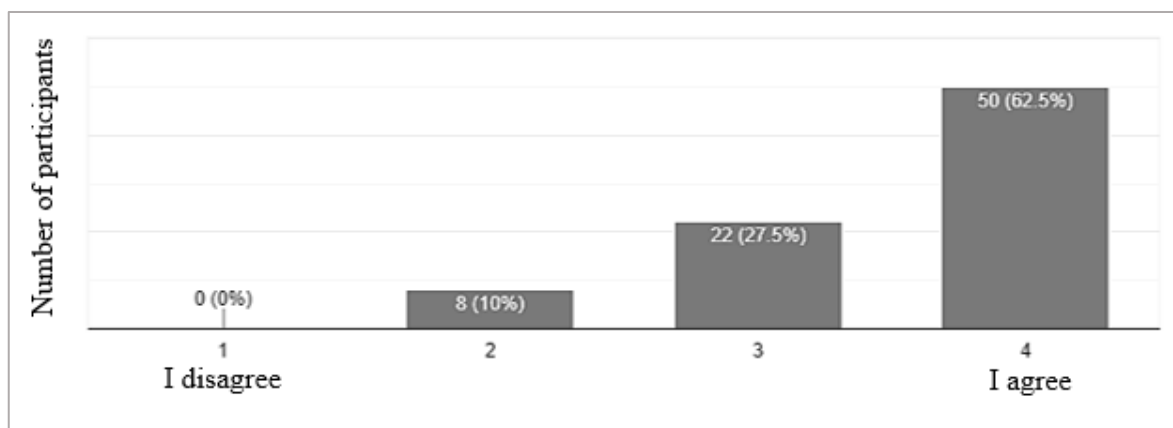


Figure 3: *If the teacher corrects me in front of my classmates, they will learn too*

As can be seen in figure 3, none of the 80 participants disagree with the statement given, and most of them (62.5%) believe that their classmates will learn from the correction of their own errors in class. These answers give more importance to the

previously asked question, since this situation can only take place when errors are corrected in front of the entire class.

Further into the questionnaire, the teachers were given a list of error correction strategies, and they were asked to choose which three they make more use of when their students make an error in class.

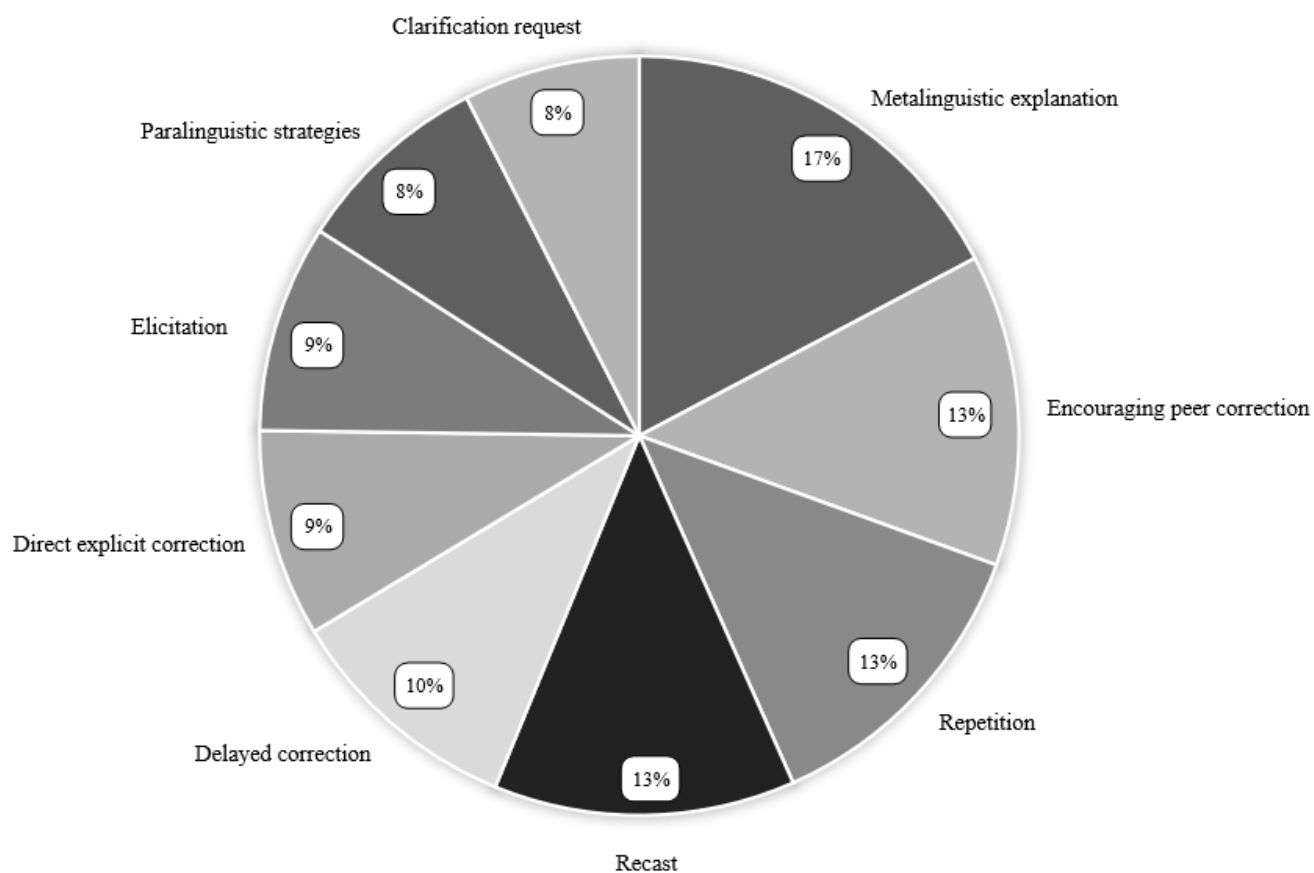


Figure 4: Error correction strategies

The most (17%) favored strategy for error correction is *metalinguistic explanation*. Teachers like to explain the grammar rules behind an error, in the hopes that if the student learns the theory by heart, they will not have problems when producing future sentences. *Repetition* and *recast* are commonly used as well, to encourage learners to correct the errors themselves. Furthermore, 13% of participants like to encourage *peer correction*, asking the classmates for the correct form, to keep everyone's attention, and to make sure every student is learning equally.



Like the previous question about types of errors, participants were given the chance of providing other correction strategies that they use. Some of them added that they like to encourage *self-correction*, one of them explaining a situation where they “(I) train (my) students to use their notes and have them explain in English the correct procedure and why it is correct.”

Another question asked to teachers was how often they make use of the students’ mother tongue to correct errors. As stated in section 1.5 (error correction), codeswitching is a helpful tool in the second language classroom, but teachers still have a certain reluctance towards it, as it has been traditionally frowned upon. Like any other strategy, the use of L1 in the ESL classroom should be applied with measure, not in every chance given. Only a 2.5% of participants answered that they *always* make use of it. 46.3% claimed to do so *occasionally*, 27.5% *sometimes*, 8.8% *often*, and a 15% declare to *never* use it.

Turning back to peer and self-correction, we get to the last question of the survey, which is related to *who* should be the one to correct classroom errors. There was a wide variety of answers to this question in the teachers’ questionnaire. It was formulated, once again, in the shape of a Likert scale, where respondents had to declare their level of agreement with the sentence *Only the teacher should correct a student’s error, and not his/her classmates*; number 1 meaning *I disagree*, and 6 representing *I agree*.

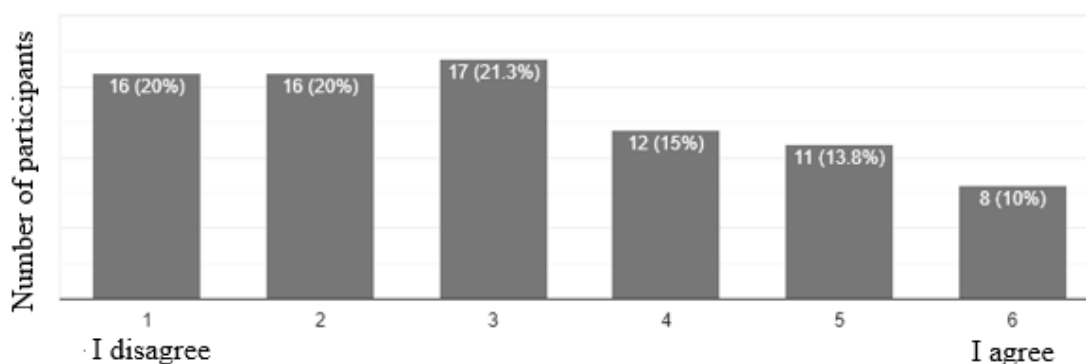


Figure 5: *Only the teacher should correct a students' error, and not his/her classmates*

The diversity of answers to this question is probably because it really depends on the situation. Different errors require different correction strategies, and every learner has their own needs and personalities, so the teachers can discern when it is appropriate to involve other students in the correction. The relationship among classmates is also important to

take into account, as this can create confrontations and personal attacks between them, becoming, in turn, more harmful than beneficial.

Students were asked this in a simpler way, through two separate questions. To the first one “*Do you feel that only the teacher should correct you or is it OK if your classmates do it too?*”, a 31.3% answered that they would like only the teacher to correct them, whereas the number of participants siding with this opinion was a little higher (37.5%) in the second question, which asked: “*Are you concerned about what your classmates might think if you make an error?*”. This has to do with the intrapersonal relationships among classmates, who can sometimes be rather harsh and judgmental, especially in the teenage years. At the end of the questionnaire, there was a voluntary answer box for participants to add further comments about errors in the ESL classroom, and some students stated the following:

*R 7: “I hate be corrected in English class, especially if it is an spell error, because makes me feel like stupid on the front of the class, and I think that my classmates may be laughing about my error.” [sic.]*

*R 8: “Sometimes little kids are mean and they make laught at their classmates” [sic.]*

### **Further comments**

At the end of both questionnaires, participants were given a space to add any further comments about errors in the classroom, or to further explain their answers to previous questions in the survey.

There was one respondent in the teachers’ questionnaire who provided quite an extended answer, giving an interesting and detailed point of view. His complete answer can be found in Appendix 3, but here is an extract of some of the things he expressed:

*R 10: “(...) errors are a result of bad learning practice. That in itself is a mistake that teachers should unquestionably try to correct, thereby avoiding remedial technical corrections later on in the students’ learning paths. This remedial work is an extremely laborious job and often it is not successful and needs individual attention, just like sports people need*

coaches to correct their flawed technique.” (...) “In Spain, the idea that theory and practice are two complementary and necessary parts of learning is widely accepted. This leads to a culture of learning grammar and afterwards trying to “practice”. This reductionist thinking approach means that there is little thought given to an integrated learning model, particularly for learning to speak (and listen).” (...) “the best correction method is to avoid mistakes, learn correctly from the beginning. Failing this, take one hundred percent ownership of errors, get an experienced teacher to signal them and take extreme remedial action to eliminate them. Also, eradicate the widespread belief that to learn to speak you only need to speak a lot. If this were true, we could all learn to speak lots of foreign languages with little or no help, and the teacher's role would be redundant.”

### **3.2 Limitations of the study**

The present research was limited to the two questionnaires. It would have been ideal to run a contrastive analysis of real errors committed by Spanish learners of English in the classroom, analyzing written productions directly from the students and identifying real errors, but due to time limitations, the investigation that was conducted was only to identify, analyze, and interpret the teachers’ and students’ opinions about errors in the learning process.

Another limitation of this study was the age gap in the sample of the students. In order for them to correctly understand the questions, only learners as young as nine were selected; and only those as old as eighteen, to restrict the population to learners attending school. The results would probably have been more varied if the research had been conducted with adult learners as well, and it would also have been interesting to make a contrast between them and the child learners.

Both surveys were conducted through Google Forms, and even though this favors anonymity, had the research been carried out face to face, it would have been easier to have a bit more control over the sample. The links for the questionnaires were sent around from participant to participant: to family members, friends, peers, and even acquaintances, so the

researcher could not fully discern whether the participants were a perfect match to what was sought.

These limitations were considered at all times during the course of the investigation and makes me wonder how it would have been if certain variables and extensions were made.

### **3.3 Further studies**

This same study could be carried out more extensively by mixing and comparing some of the variables, like the nationality of students, for instance. There would probably had been a higher diversity of answers if the learners came from other countries with lower levels of socioeconomic development, or with contrasting cultural mindsets, like Eastern and Asian countries, where there is a higher and more severe resistance to errors. Furthermore, as mentioned above, if the age scope of the student sample had been widened, there would have been a broader diversity of answers, which would not only make the study more complete but also more interesting.

This research focused on grammatical and syntactical errors, but, as it was reminded to me by some participants in the “further comments” section of the questionnaire, phonological errors constitute a big part of the learning process of Spanish students. The inclusion of pronunciation errors could thus be interesting for the analysis of ESL classes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the review of literature, there is no doubt that errors should be taken as assets in the learning process, especially in the language classroom. Moreover, error correction has been found crucial to successful language learning, and it is a strategy that must be applied in the classroom to ensure a successful acquisition of concepts. There are myriad of factors that condition the error correction process. Not only the characteristics differ from one error to the next, but also the learner’s individual needs are important to consider: his/her aptitudes and skills, as well as other emotional and personal factors, such as motivation, anxiety level and self-esteem, among others. This may appear to complicate educational experiences, but it is crucial to take it into consideration in order for students to gain

meaningful learning experiences. It is thus the teacher's responsibility to choose the most effective methods of corrective feedback depending on the error and the student.

It was surprising to see in the results of the investigation that most teachers still have such a negative viewpoint towards errors, most probably conditioned by traditional perceptions, because extensive studies provide enough proof that they are a natural part of language learning, and they can be used in both the students' and the teachers' favor. Therefore, a change in the frame of reference is encouraged: not to be afraid of errors, and to seize them rather than avoiding them, to benefit from their use and from their correction.

Students' and teachers' opinions should be put in contrast more often, to ensure an understanding between them, and find out what strategies and methodologies work best in the way to a successful learning experience and the acquisition of a proficient communicative competence.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1: Questionnaire Error perception of Spanish ESL Teachers

Hello everyone! My name is Beatriz, and I'm studying a master's programme in Language and Intercultural communication. The aim of this questionnaire is to conduct an analysis on errors committed by Spanish students in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. Thank you for your time and contribution to the study. :)

1. How old are you?
2. What country are you from?
3. What is your mother tongue?
4. How many years of experience do you have as an English teacher?
  - a) Less than 2 years
  - b) 2-5 years
  - c) 5-10 years
  - d) More than 10 years
5. Errors are something negative that should be avoided  
I strongly disagree ●—●—●—●—●—● I strongly agree
6. What are the most common errors that your students make in class? (choose up to 4)
  - Misuse of pronouns, mainly improper formation of possessive pronouns (e.g. his for she)
  - No auxiliary with negative and interrogative sentences (e.g. "Maria like skating?" instead of "Does María like skating?")
  - Improper subject/verb concord (e.g. María play with the ball / My cousins lives in Sweden)
  - Improper use of for
  - Subject omission
  - Wrong use of prepositions (e.g. "depends of" instead of "depends on")
  - Improper use of the prepositions "on, in and at"
  - Adding or omitting an article (e.g. "I like playing the basketball" / "I am boy")
  - Confusion with before and after
  - Literal translation (e.g. "I am agree")
  - Other...
7. To the best of your knowledge, how often are these errors caused by mother tongue interference?
  - a) Always
  - b) Most times
  - c) Sometimes
  - d) Never

8. How do you prefer to correct students when they make errors while speaking?
- e) In front of their classmates
  - f) Privately, only where he or she can hear
  - g) Both
9. Why?
10. When do you prefer making a correction?
- a) Instantly when the error is made
  - b) After the student has finished speaking
11. Only the teacher should correct a student's error, and not his/her classmates
- I disagree ●————●————●————●————●————● I agree
12. Do you use different strategies to correct errors?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
13. Which of the following strategies do you use the most? (choose up to 3 answers)
- Metalinguistic explanation (explaining the grammar behind the mistake)
  - Repetition (repeat the mistake back at the student so they realize and correct themselves)
  - Direct explicit correction (highlight the mistake and say the correct form)
  - Peer correction (ask the classmates where the mistake is and if they know the correct answer)
  - Delayed correction (note down the mistake and correct it later)
  - Recast (say the correct form back to the student)
  - Paralinguistic (help the student correct themselves with gestures)
  - Elicitation (repeat the sentence but making a pause to let the student correct themselves)
  - Clarification request (“excuse me?” “What do you mean?”)
  - Telling them they are wrong
  - Other
14. How often do you use your/your student's mother tongue to correct errors?
- a) Never
  - b) Occasionally
  - c) Sometimes
  - d) Often
  - e) Always
15. Further comments about errors in the English classroom

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire Error perception of Spanish ESL Students

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from? For example, were you born in Spain or somewhere else?
3. What is your mother tongue? (your first language)
4. What language do you use most during English class?
  - a) English
  - b) My mother tongue.
5. If you make a mistake in class, is it better to ignore it, or correct it?
  - a) Ignore it
  - b) Correct it
6. Do you correct yourself when you make an error in English?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
7. How do you prefer to be corrected?
  - a) The teacher can correct me in front of my classmates, I am ok with that.
  - b) I prefer to be corrected by the teacher when we are not in front of my classmates.
  - c) I have no preference, either one is ok.
8. Why?
9. If the teacher corrects me in front of my classmates, they will learn too  
I disagree ● ——— ● ——— ● ——— ● ——— ● ——— ● I agree
10. When do you prefer to be corrected?
  - a) While I am answering (at the moment I make the mistake)
  - b) After I have finished answering
11. Do you feel that only the teacher should correct you, or is it OK if your classmates do it too?
  - a) Only the teacher
  - b) It is ok if classmates correct me
12. When you are speaking/writing in English, do you think what you're going to say in your mother tongue first and then translate, or do you think directly in English?
  - a) I translate
  - b) I think in English
13. Do you think your mother tongue interferes with your English skills?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
14. Are you concerned about what your classmates might think if you make an error?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
15. Do you have any more comments about errors in the English classroom? You can also explain or provide more information on some of your previous answers here.

### **Appendix 3: Further Comments of *Respondent 10***

At the end of both questionnaires, participants were given a space to add any further comments about errors in the classroom, or to further explain their answers to previous questions in the survey.

There was one respondent in the teachers' questionnaire who provided quite an extended answer, giving an interesting and detailed point of view. It can be found here:

“In reply to most of the questions above, I probably would have preferred to repeatedly quote one of the most annoying Spanish speaking students' mistakes in English class... "Depend".

I believe that there exists the assumption in language teaching that mistakes are a separate aspect to the learning (and teaching) process. However, in my opinion things are a bit more complex and I feel that the single most important mistake is not mentioned in your questionnaire. I appreciate it's probably outside the scope of your Thesis (I also notice you haven't included pronunciation errors in their myriad forms or errors in use of lexis, false cognates, etc.). The biggest mistake is the way students conceive learning and the methods they use to learn. Said simply, errors are a result of bad learning practice. That in itself is a mistake that teachers should unquestionably try to correct, thereby avoiding remedial technical corrections later on in the students' learning paths. This remedial work is an extremely labourious job and often it is not successful and needs individual attention, just like sports people need coaches to correct their flawed technique.

On the specific subject of technical grammar mistakes, in general one Spanish speaker will make the same technical mistakes in English as others and nearly all are a direct consequence of L1. The difference is that some make a lot of mistakes and others relatively few. The ones that make mistakes continue to make them, sometimes even after hundreds of reiterations of corrections using lots of different techniques (I've even created individual student Google tests for each student to do correction exercises on their own mistakes). This tendency to make mistakes is NOT necessarily dependent on their level but obviously there is a correlation, as students who have used incorrect learning methodology are less likely to progress to higher levels. The reason some progress and make fewer mistakes I believe is because of how those students learned to

speak. They had the correct models laid down early in their learning path while the others didn't. This has a number of positive consequences that help these students progress with less effort while others trudge labouriously on without any sense of progress. But what is the most common error by Spanish speakers in English? I'd be pretty confident about stating that it is what you call "Improper subject/verb Concord"; more specifically, in dropping the "s" in the third person singular Present Simple tense. "A mere bagatelle!", we might say. So, what is the single most important technical error? That must be defined more generally as the inability to express correctly in the target language an idea that the student is formulating in their head as they speak. This seems very vague but for me it includes all the errors of omission because the student doesn't not have knowledge of the correct forms or vocabulary in English. I appreciate this is probably a bit too philosophical for your Thesis.

In Spain the idea that theory and practice are two complementary and necessary parts of learning is widely accepted. This leads to a culture of learning grammar and afterwards trying to 'practise'. This reductionist thinking approach means that there is little thought given to an integrated learning model, particularly for learning to speak (and listen). With the caveat that I'm about to simplify enormously; in my opinion students at low levels should be guided through structured speaking exercises to imprint the correct basic forms of the target language until their brain accepts these as correct and the 'typical' Spanish speaker forms are eliminated or overwritten. However, heuristic learning requires a clear reward for correct performance and an immediate signalling of mistakes. So this, for various reasons, would require involving students in the strategic thinking on how they learn and encouraging them to take ownership of their learning. A difficult task in a society where a multimillion Euro industry sells books and magical methods!

In conclusion, the best correction method is to avoid mistakes, learn correctly from the beginning. Failing this, take one hundred percent ownership of errors, get an experienced teacher to signal them and take extreme remedial action to eliminate them. Also, eradicate the widespread belief that to learn to speak you only need to speak a lot. If this were true, we could all learn to speak lots of foreign languages with little or no help, and the teacher's role would be redundant.”