

COLECCIÓN CONOCIMIENTO CONTEMPORÁNEO

El devenir de la lingüística y la cultura: un estudio interdisciplinar sobre lengua, literatura y traducción

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kinson, S.L.

## EL DEVENIR DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA Y LA CULTURA: UN ESTUDIO INTERDISCIPLINAR SOBRE LENGUA, LITERATURA Y TRADUCCIÓN

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2022

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## A COMPARATIVE ERROR ANALYSIS IN THE WRITTEN COMPOSITIONS OF ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there is a clear tendency to consider the errors made by students in their process of language learning not as a negative aspect of language learning but, rather on the contrary, as a natural step in the development of their language skills. As Corder stated, "the errors that learners make are a major element in the feedback system of the process that we call language teaching and learning" (Corder, 1981: 35).

In the past, teachers considered errors committed by students as something undesirable, something to prevent from occurring at all means. But in the last decades, given the many scientific studies published, researchers came to consider errors as evidence for a creative process in language learning.

Error analysis provides us with scientific evidence for the system of language that students are using at any time in the course of development of their studies. Basically, this analysis consists of four main steps: to identify the errors, to explain the errors, to categorise the errors, and to evaluate the errors.

Consequently, the errors which emerge from the students' learning process can clearly tell us what needs to be taught or fostered and how the learning is ongoing at any time in order to take the necessary adjustments. Quoting Saville-Troike "learner errors are windows into the language learner's mind" (Saville-Troike, 2006: 39). Also, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) believe that an analysis of errors made by language learners can help us understand the process of language learning deeply. Besides, it also helps teachers to decide on those teaching materials that best fit the learning needs of the language learners.

And at universities, students are taught to master, at least up to a certain level, English in its four different skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And among these four skills, writing is undoubtedly the most important productive to be learned. But not only is the most productive of the four skills, but it is also the one that they usually face with certain suspicion and even fear due to their proven inability to express correctly in written English, regardless the nature of the task assigned. As a result, this turns out to be problematic when it comes to giving them feedback.

We should especially bear in mind the fact that we are not working with students doing the English Studies degree at university, whose English level could be expected to be higher than average, but a technical one on engineering studies. Consequently, all this background information has its natural reflection on the numerous errors committed by them in the written productions which had to be undertaken.

Therefore, the main objective of this study will be to classify the errors made by several Spanish students doing an engineering degree in a public Polytechnic University over the last two years, according to the comparative taxonomy of Dulay, Burt, and Krashen. We will attempt not only to categorise the errors following the taxonomy, but also to demonstrate that the most frequent type of errors detected, at least in the case of this specific group of technical students whose English level is not the same as those students doing the English Studies degree, is not the one expected and predicted by some researchers.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Making errors is considered indispensable in the process of language learning. The notion of error analysis was firstly proposed by Corder in 1967, who stated that the existence of errors gave indication that the second language was being developed in showing the learners' exploration of their L2.

Error Analysis is seen as an approach that intends to describe and explain the deviation of errors produced in the learner's language. In doing so, there is a procedure which is considered necessary to follow. The method of error analysis consists of a collection of models, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors according to Ellis (1994).

The assortment of samples deals with the phase of determining the design of error found. After that, there is a need to identify the error. Then the error is described through the process of classification and categorization. Finally, errors are evaluated asserting how important they are and whether they are serious errors or not.

Corder in 1981 signalled some implications of doing error analysis. For teachers, error analysis gave them information on how far the apprentice had learned or the progress of his learning of L2 and what still remained to be learned. However, for researchers, error analysis could provide evidence related to how language was actually acquired or learnt. Even for learners, error analysis had a role as a device that could be used to learn and to develop their target language.

It is also important to mention that errors are different from mistakes. Following Corder (1981), errors deal with deviances which are caused by lack of competence, while mistakes are regarded as the performance of errors which are considered not significant. Errors are the result of the learner's provisional competence whilst mistakes are the result of an external factor to the competence of the learner.

Error taxonomies were regarded as an effective basis for successful feedback and they were supposed to bring forth consistent results. However, a standardized error taxonomy does not exist. Instead, what it did exist was an assortment of error taxonomies being especially conspicuous when the corpus of learners' productions had to be analysed.

As a result, the feedback provided to the students' outcome varied from teacher to teacher and from taxonomy to taxonomy. However, all these

error taxonomies were expected to produce trustworthy results. Consequently, different approaches in an attempt to classify errors have been used in the recent decades.

In the first place, there was the classification according to the level of linguistic description. This universally applied error taxonomy employed the different levels of linguistic analysis (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics...) as the basis for defining error types. Among the scholars who followed this classification we could include Vernon George (1972), or Rod Ellis and Gary Barkhuizen (2005). This taxonomy classified errors into passive voice, temporal conjunctions, transitive verbs, or wrong word, among some others.

Carl James (1988) asserted that errors were considered with respect to the place the error occupied in the whole system of the foreign language. According to James, this taxonomy postulated in which part of language the error was placed, affecting in that way to the linguistic item bothered by such error.

Another classification combined the level of linguistic description and the alteration in a setting of ideal performance. This approach described each error detected both with regard to the level of linguistic analysis and in terms of alteration in the hypothetical ideal performance. This taxonomy, followed by Fabian Pibal (2012), distinguished error categories like tense omission, modal verbs, misordering, etc.

A third classification was developed according to the alterations in the ideal performance of the learners. This taxonomy, put forward by Heidi Dulay, Marina Burt and Stephen Krashen in 1982, was less popular and more abstract than the others since errors were described in terms of what had been modified on the "surface structure". This taxonomy included errors into the following types: omission (when some elements required by the norm was left out), addition (when some element which was excluded by the norm was added), misformation (when some element was expressed by a form debarred by the norm), and misordering (when elements were ordered in a manner not allowed by the norm).

The classification defended by this taxonomy gave us a precise clarification about the cognitive procedures that caused the students' reconstruction of the new language that was being learnt. As Dulay, Burt, and Krashen affirmed "errors are not the result of laziness or sloppy thinking, but of the learner's use of interim principles to produce a new language" (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982: 150).

These scholars previously mentioned, Dulay, Burt and Krashen, also developed two other classifications of errors. One of these was the classification based on the amount of message diminishing since it attempted to describe errors in terms of the degree to which they disrupted the message in information theory terms. Basically, it dealt with differentiating between errors that seemed to cause miscommunication and those that did not.

Therefore, within this taxonomy errors were featured according to their effect on the listeners or readers, being divided into global errors and local errors. Global errors contained large amounts of noise and seriously damaged comprehensibility, such as violations of major syntactic rules. Global errors were errors that distressed the complete sentence organization and they expressively hampered communication. These errors included the wrong order of major constituents, missing, wrong or misplaced sentence connectors, and regularization of pervasive syntactic rules to exception.

On the other hand, local errors were said to cause noise to a lesser degree and comprised a narrower focus. For example, errors in article use or in verb inflections. These errors influenced single elements in a sentence and that did not usually hinder communication meaningfully, at least not to a great degree. This type of errors included errors in noun and verb inflections, articles, auxiliaries, and the formation of quantifiers, among some others.

Finally, the other classification set forth by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, and the one we are going to analyse to a deeper extent on since it is the taxonomy being followed in this research, tried to categorise errors in terms of their probable cause. The different foundations of errors could be due to the learners' L1, to another foreign language, or to widespread

cognitive limitations. This taxonomy classified error categories into the following types: interlingual errors (errors which were assigned to interference), developmental errors (errors which took place due to universal cognitive constraints), ambiguous errors (errors ascribed to more than one possible source), and other errors (a sort of remainder category for non-descript errors). As Dulay, Burt, and Krashen affirmed, "the classification of errors in a comparative taxonomy is based on comparisons between the structure of L2 errors and certain other types of constructions" (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982: 163).

Different researchers have reliably discovered that the vast majority of errors in the language output of L2 learners, in our case undergraduate Spanish engineering students, was of the developmental type. Conversely, as we will be ascertaining in the present study, the great majority of the errors detected in the 52 essays surveyed in our research corresponded to the interlingual type.

According to these researchers, "*developmental errors* are errors which are similar to those made by children learning the target language as their first language" (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982: 165). Taking, for example, the following sentence made by a Spanish child learning English "cat eat it", the omission of both the definite article and the past tense marker may be classified as developmental because they are also found in the speech of children learning English as their first language. When such errors occur, mental mechanisms underlying general language development come into play, not the rules and structures of the learner's native language.

Quoting these researchers, *"interlingual errors* are similar in structure to a semantically equivalent phrase or sentence in the learner's native language" (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982: 171). For example, the utterance "the woman tall" produced by a Spanish speaker reflects the word order of Spanish adjectival phrases [article + noun + adjective]. When trying to identify an interlingual error, what researchers normally do is to translate the grammatical form of the learner's sentence into the learner's first language in order to see if there exist similarities. *Ambiguous errors* could be similarly classified as developmental or interlingual errors. According to Dulay, Burt, and Krashen "this type of error reflects both the learner's L1 and also the type of error in the speech of children acquiring English as their first language" (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982: 172). For example, in the utterance "I no have a motorbike", the negative construction imitates the learner's native Spanish and it is also typical of the speech of children learning English as their first language.

*Other errors* make up a sort of grab bag for elements that do not fit properly into any other previous category. For example, if we take the utterance "He do hungry", the speaker used neither the native Spanish structure (in the use of have for is as in He have hungry), nor an L2 developmental form (such as He hungry), where the auxiliary is omitted altogether. This sort of errors would then fit into other errors.

Such an error would fall into the other category, also called "unique errors" by Dulay and Burt (1974), denoting their being unique to L2 learners. These errors are not similar to those made by children during the first language enhancement, so they must be unique to second language learners. And since they are not interlingual, at least some of them must be unique reproductions of an original construction.

And we cannot skip the latest study carried out by McDowell and Liardet (2020) who employed an error analysis framework, elaborated with the functional descriptions of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), to investigate error patterns in research article manuscripts written by Japanese materials scientists.

Results highlighted the difficulties that the nominal group constituted for participants, with almost half (47.81%) of the identified errors occurring within complex nominal groups. Further, the analysis revealed that the most dominant error pattern involved errors with articles and plural -s. Findings from the study also informed the design of a pedagogical tool to assist Japanese materials scientists and language specialists alike in identifying and rectifying these errorsAt this point, just before moving to the next section, it is also worthwhile mentioning certain distinctive studies developed by a group of Spanish university professors and their aides such as Julio Roca de Larios, Rosa Manchón, Elizabeth Murphy, or Juan Luis Conde among some others. The outcomes produced by this group in the last decades have greatly helped sort out not only the monitoring of errors, but also other techniques and strategies developed in the process of L2 writing.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The present research was conducted using a quantitative research design that was used to disclose what type of errors and how many these undergraduate Spanish students made. Not only did we attempt to classify all the errors encountered, but also, and more specifically, we did find out what the most frequent ones were. Let's remember at this point that we were following the comparative taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen in "Language Two" (1982), as we forestalled in the previous section.

The group of students included in this study encompassed an uneven number of undergraduate technical engineering students who were doing their degree on a public Spanish Polytechnic University. These students, who were mostly male given the technical nature of the degree, were asked to carry out a written assignment during the last two academic years in order to get a bigger quantity of participants. This uneven number of contributions is laid on the fact that not the same number of students handed in the task each academic year. Therefore, a total of 52 essays were delivered between both courses.

The focus of the study was thus laid on the classification of the many errors committed by these undergraduate students along the written assignment. And in order to do so we kept the comparative taxonomy classification offered by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, which divided errors into four different categories: ambiguous, developmental, interlingual, and other errors. For the sake of clarity, we should clarify that these categories have been arranged here alphabetically for the time being.

As a result, the instruments which were used to develop this current research referred to the writing compositions that these students had to

undertake along the semester. At this point the authors figure out that it is important to remark an important fact about the assignment. Although the students had to cope with writing the essay about a specific topic as we will later specify, it is also true that prior to this writing they received the necessary background information in terms not only of grammar of vocabulary but also of the required structures, which would apparently enable them to deal with the assignment appropriately.

Finally, regarding the procedure, this study was conducted during one semester in the last two consecutive academic years. The collection of data did not take place until all the necessary information had been studied and dealt with in class, on the one hand, and they also had enough time to carry out the assignment, on the other. Although many different errors were encountered, only those falling under the comparative taxonomy were taken into consideration.

## 4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Behind the analysis of the data which we obtained, in general terms, we can affirm that a total of 213 errors were encountered along the 52 essays looked upon, which resulted into an approximate average of four errors per essay. Taking into account that there were 17 essays with no errors at all, this figure gives us an accurate idea on the number of errors which were detected along the task for the remaining 35 compositions.

In order to conduct this research, we have been following the comparative taxonomy of errors proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), being errors classified into the following four types: ambiguous errors, developmental errors, interlingual errors, and other errors. Errors that did not fall under these categories were not considered in this study.

The task that students had to cope with was writing about the different types of materials existing, in which they had to specify their properties making use of the suffixes and lexical families that they had studied. This task was meant to be handed in after they had dealt with a topic on materials in class. Having a close look at the 52 essays delivered in this task, the number of writings with 5 or more errors presented the highest incidence with a subtotal of 20 essays out of 52, which meant a 38.5% of the total. Next, we came across those essays with no errors detected with a subtotal of 17 essays, standing out for a 32.7% in all. In the third place, we found those compositions containing 3 or 4 errors with a subtotal of 8 essays, representing a 15.3% overall. And finally, the number of compositions with 1 or 2 errors presented the least number of cases with just 7 essays, which made up a 13.5% as a whole.

Going a bit deeper into the analysis of the 35 essays with at least one error found, the category of errors with the highest frequency was interlingual errors with a subtotal of 74 errors spotted, which represented a 34.7% of the total. The second category of errors in terms of occurrences was that of other errors, with a subtotal of 70 errors, representing a 32.9% overall. However, it should be clarified at this point that the justification for such an elevated figure might well lie in the excessive number of spelling errors on the part of the students.

The third category would then be ambiguous errors, with 35 cases detected, making up a 16.4% of the total. And finally, the category with the least number of errors detected in the task was that of developmental errors with a subtotal of 34 errors, standing out for a 16% in all was as can be seen in the next table alphabetically arranged.

Type of error	Number of errors	Percentage	
Ambiguous errors	35	16.4%	
Developmental errors	34	16%	
Interlingual errors	74	34.7%	
Other errors	70	32.9%	
TOTAL	213		

Table 1. Number and percentage of error categories in the task

Source: Own elaboration

Focusing on the category with the highest number of errors detected in the task, *interlingual errors*, as we explained in advance, a total of 74 errors were found out along the 52 essays delivered, which represented

a 34.7% of the total. These interlingual errors were also divided into the following types: addition of past tense, omission of preposition, addition of preposition, inappropriate noun phrase, verb-number disagreement, inappropriate demonstrative, inappropriate preposition, and inappropriate pronoun.

Type of error	Number of errors	Percentage
Addition of past tense	1	1.3%
Omission of preposition	4	5.4%
Addition of preposition	3	4%
Inappropriate noun phrase	10	13.5%
Verb-number disagreement	32	43.3%
Inappropriate demonstrative	3	4%
Inappropriate preposition	3	4%
Inappropriate pronoun	18	24.4%
TOTAL	74	34.7%

Table 2. Distribution, Number and Percentage of Interlingual Errors in the Task

Source: Own elaboration

As can be observed in the table, the type of interlingual error which recurrently presented the highest incidence was the case of verb-number disagreement, with 32 errors detected, standing out for a 43.3% of the total. Students still seemed to have problems when maintaining the concordance between the subject and the verb as in the next example: "The second special material is the extensible stick which <u>fit</u> into the jeans pocket". This may well prove that they pay more attention to the content than to the form in technical writings.

The second type of interlingual error in terms of numbers was the use of an inappropriate pronoun, something which happened 18 times, representing then a 24.4% overall. The following sentence could be included as an example of this type: "There are some materials created for the people because of <u>her</u> use". Surprisingly, students seemed to have certain problems when using the correct pronoun, something we could not foresee at the beginning.

In the third place, we came across the use of an inappropriate noun phrase with 10 errors identified along the task, which signified a 13.5% of the total. As an example of such an error we could include the following which illustrates the problems encountered: "It is a <u>material gelatinous</u> and has the property of attracting elements". Students apparently followed the Spanish order in the construction of long complex sentences without even noticing.

The presence of the other types of interlingual errors was quite less frequent, going down from 4 to 1 error depending on the type. Hence, the omission of the preposition would be the next type with 4 errors observed, which embodied a 5.4% of the total. The following sentence can be included as an example of this error: "The last material is a matrix of colours that changes the colour in response \_\_\_\_ the smells". The inclusion of the preposition did not seem to pose any serious problem.

Next there came up three different types of interlingual errors, the addition of a preposition, the use of an inappropriate demonstrative and the use of an inappropriate preposition, with 3 errors each one, symbolising a 4% of the total. As an example of the addition of a preposition when it was not required, we could include the following: "You can to wet any systems without producing short-circuits". Unexpectedly, students tended to overuse prepositions when these were not required. The use of the inappropriate demonstrative was also seen in the next sample: "<u>This</u> properties are very important". And the following was a case of the use of an inappropriate preposition: "... or detect a concrete page depending <u>of</u> your culture".

The last type of interlingual error, and the least numerous, was the addition of a past tense when it was not needed. This happened just once along the task, representing a mere 1.3% in all. The following could be included as an example: "When we want to choose one material, we must <u>looked</u> for each one which has the qualities that we need". This may be justified as a careless writing on the student's side rather than on any concrete problem.

The second category with the highest number of errors detected in this task was that of *other errors* with 70 errors spotted, which represented

almost a 33% of the total. This category of other errors was also distributed into the following 5 types: addition of article, addition of plural marker, omission of progressive form, incorrect spelling, and addition of subject.

Type of error	Number of errors	Percentage
Addition of article	22	31.4%
Addition of plural marker	10	14.3%
Omission of progressive form	3	4.3%
Incorrect spelling	30	42.9%
Addition of subject	5	7.1%
TOTAL	70	32.9%

Table 3. Distribution, Number and Percentage of Other Errors in the Task

Source: Own elaboration

The type of other errors with the highest frequency, as can be observed, was that of the incorrect spelling of a word with 30 errors detected, which represented almost a 43% of the total. Taking into account the technical nature of the task assigned, it may seem reasonable to expect such a figure. Had it not been for this type, the presence of this type of errors would surely have been much less significative in the task. As an example of this type of error we could include the following sentence: "Iron and iron alloys are the most common <u>comercial</u> metals". We could expect to come across such a figure due to the technical nature of the writing and the number of technical words they were supposed to include in the task.

The second type of other errors, which was reasonably close in numbers, was the addition of an article, whether it being definite or indefinite, with 22 errors spotted, denoting a 31.4% as a whole. Articles were unnecessarily added in sentences as can be seen in the following sample: "<u>A</u> one example of rigid plastic is a bracelet that adapts perfectly to the wrist". We can consider this figure as something odd since it did not seem sensible to come across so many errors belonging to this type.

The third type of other errors in terms of number of appearances was the addition of a plural marker when it was not required. This occurred 10 times along the task, standing out for a 14.3% in all. As an example of this type of error we could cite the following: "... and has the properties of attracting elements or <u>magnetics</u> elements". Quite again, students followed the Spanish pattern by which the plural formation is not only added to nouns but also to adjectives, unlike English.

And the presence of the remaining two types of other errors was rather testimonial. If the addition of the subject happened 5 times, meaning a 7.1%, the omission of the progressive form occurred in 3 cases, denoting a 4.3% of the total. As an example of the former, the addition of the subject, we could include the following case. "We can see that this condition <u>it's</u> not met". And as an example of the latter, the omission of the progressive form, we could include the next one: "It is stronger but it loses strength at <u>elevate</u> the temperature". Careless writing might be at the core of these two types of errors since they should have been detected easily by the students.

The third category in the number of errors detected in the task was that of *ambiguous errors*, with 35 errors representing a 16.4% of the total. And the following 5 types of ambiguous errors could be found in the task: omission of article, omission of subject, omission of object, inappropriate quantifier, and inappropriate article.

Type of error	Number of errors	Percentage
Omission of article	10	28.6%
Omission of subject	10	28.6%
Omission of object	1	2.8%
Inappropriate quantifier	10	28.6%
Inappropriate article	4	11.4%
TOTAL	35	16.4%

Table 4. Distribution, Number and Percentage of Ambiguous Errors in the Task

Source: Own elaboration

As can be seen in the previous table, quite curiously, three different types of ambiguous errors shared the same number of incidences in the task with 10 errors each, which denoted a 28.6% of the total: the

omission of the article, the omission of the subject, and the use of an inappropriate quantifier.

As an example of the first type, the omission of the article regardless of being definite or indefinite, we could include the following: "In \_\_\_\_\_ fifth place, special ink can change its resistance". This reflected somehow the Spanish structure by means of which no article is used in such constructions. The second type, the omission of the subject, was reflected in the next example: "The special material is a colourless liquid and \_\_\_\_\_\_ evaporates 25 times faster than water". Again, this is easily justified for a Spanish speaker since the impersonal subject is not included in the sentences and they tend to repeat the pattern. And the third case, the use of an inappropriate quantifier seen in the following sentence, repeats the same circumstance: "These materials are perfectly adapted to daily life to facilitate <u>others</u> aspects of life". The influence of the L1 is easily seen in these previous examples.

The last but one type of ambiguous errors in number of occurrences was the use of an inappropriate article. This case happened 4 times along the task, standing out for a 11.4% overall. The following could be included as a sample of this type of error: "<u>An</u> typical application of this element is painting nails".

And the type of ambiguous errors with the least presence in the task was the omission of the subject, with just one case spotted meaning a symbolic 2.8% as a whole. This type of errors could be seen in the following example: "You can put this stick into your pocket with the peculiarity that you can unroll \_\_\_\_ manually". If students tended to omit the impersonal subject in the sentences keeping the Spanish formation, so they did with the impersonal object as shown in the previous sentence.

Finally, in the last place, the category with the least number of errors detected along the task was that of *developmental errors* with 34 cases observed, just one less than ambiguous errors, which represented a 16% of the total for the task, contrary to the view of other researchers who maintained that this was usually the most common and numerous type of error. Among this category we could include the following types of

errors: omission of auxiliary, omission of copula, omission of plural marker, omission of regular past tense marker, omission of irregular past tense marker, addition of irregular past, inappropriate part of speech, incorrect auxiliary, and omission of infinitive marker "to".

Type of error	Number of errors	Percentage
Omission of auxiliary	3	8.8%
Omission of copula	2	5.9%
Omission of plural marker	7	20.6%
Omission of regular past tense marker	7	20.6%
Omission of irregular past tense marker	1	2.9%
Addition of irregular past	1	2.9%
Inappropriate part of speech	10	29.4%
Incorrect auxiliary	1	2.9%
Omission of infinitive marker "to"	2	5.9%
TOTAL	34	16%

Table 5. Distribution, Number and Percentage of Developmental Errors in the Task

Source:	Own	elaboration

As can be perceived in the table, the distribution of developmental errors in the task was quite even with no huge differences in terms of numbers. This way the type of developmental error with the greatest number of incidences was the use of an inappropriate part of speech with 10 errors detected, which made up a 29.4% of the total. As an example of this type of error we could include the following: "The best property is that do not drive the electricity". Constructing the sentences in the right order seemed to pose certain problems in some students, reflecting the Spanish equivalent structure.

Next, we came across two other types of developmental errors with 7 cases spotted in each case, representing a 20.6% overall: the omission of a plural marker and the omission of the regular past tense marker. The former case, the omission of a plural marker, was seen in the next sample: "These are the six innovative <u>material</u> that can contribute to progress". And the following sentence can be included as an example

of the latter case, the omission of the regular past tense marker: "The next special material is 3M, a liquid, and is <u>evaporate</u> 25 times faster than the water". The presence of these two types of errors can be directly attributed to a careless writing since it is quite uncommon to come across such a number.

In the fourth place, in terms of numbers, there was the omission of the auxiliary verb, with 3 errors detected along the task, symbolising an 8.8% in all. The following sentence could be included as an example of this type of error: "The other special material, the rigid plastic, \_\_\_\_\_ not have elasticity". Repeating again the Spanish structure seems to justify the presence of this type of error.

Then we came across two other types of developmental errors with the same number of errors found in the task, 2 in either case, which stood out for almost a 6% of the total: the omission of the copula and the omission of the infinitive marker "to". As an example of the former type, the omission of the copula, we could cite the following: "Another application \_\_\_\_\_ a rigid tablecloth". Meanwhile, the latter type, the omission of the infinitive marker "to" was regarded in the next case: "It is so difficult \_\_\_\_\_ find iron in its pure form". Meanwhile the first case can be directly attributed to an uncaring writing, the second seems to repeat the Spanish influence in the students.

Finally, in the last place in frequency, there were two other types of developmental errors with just one error detected in each case, which meant almost a 3% as a whole: the omission of an irregular past tense marker, the addition of an irregular past, and the use of an incorrect auxiliary form. Since their presence along the task was nothing but symbolic, no strong conclusions can be drawn at this point.

The omission of an irregular past tense marker was reflected in the following example: "Intelligent materials have been <u>making</u> with expensive machines". The second case, the addition of an irregular past, was denoted in this sentence: "People understood materials and knew how to <u>built</u> and repair them". Lastly, the following could be included as an example of the use of an incorrect auxiliary form: "It <u>do</u> not scratch with a metal tip".

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

No doubt that writing is perhaps one of the most difficult skills for FL students to acknowledge, especially when we are referring to technical undergraduate Spanish students whose command of English differs from that of students doing the English Studies degree or any related field of expertise. This is an important aspect that we should bear in mind in the first place.

Throughout the present article, errors have been classified according to the classification proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen in "Language Two" (1982) into four taxonomies or categories: linguistic category, surface strategy taxonomy, comparative taxonomy, and communicative effect taxonomy. And more concretely, we have been following the comparative taxonomy in this research whereby errors were organised into the next four main categories: ambiguous errors, developmental errors, interlingual errors, and other errors (being arranged here alphabetically without any other restraining factor).

The first important aspect to recall back is the fact that some of the researchers mentioned in the present study defended that the majority of errors that adult FL learners committed corresponded to the developmental category. However, we have corroborated that it was not the case in our research. We have shown that the most frequent errors that undergraduate technical engineering students made belonged to the category of interlingual errors, contrary to the opinion of these researchers.

Secondly, the data obtained in this research came from the thorough analysis of the 52 essays handed in by Spanish undergraduate engineering students during the last two academic years. These students had to deliver a written task along the semester with a similar distribution each year. In this task, students had to specify the properties of materials once a topic on materials had been discussed in class.

Thirdly, concentrating on the number of errors, a total of 213 errors were detected in the written assignment with an uneven distribution, which gave us an estimated average of 4.1 errors per essay as a whole. Nonetheless, we should also take into account that such number of errors was discovered in the 35 essays that contained one error at least (being the accurate average 6.1).

In the fourth place, we can also emphasise the number of errors detected in the 52 essays. In this, we made a distinction between essays without errors, essays having one or two errors, essays having three or four errors, and essays having more than five errors. And in terms of numbers, the first group was that composed of essays having more than five errors with a total of 20 essays, representing a 38.5% of the total. Next, we had those essays without errors detected with a total of 17 cases, standing for a 32.7% overall. In the third place, we found out essays with three or four errors, with 8 cases standing for a 15.3% in total. And finally, the least representative group was that of essays with one or two errors with 7 essays in total, denoting a 13.5% as a whole. These data can easily be interpreted in the next explanatory figure.



Figure 1. Number of errors in the task



In the fifth place, we focused on the different categories of errors encountered along the 52 essays. And contrary to the view of some researchers, we determined that interlingual errors, and not developmental errors, was the category with the highest number of occurrences with a total of 74 errors, making up a 34.7% of the total. In the second place there came other errors, with 70 errors in total, representing a 32.9% overall. The third place was for ambiguous errors with 35 cases detected, which denoted a 16.4% in all. Finally, the last representative category was that of developmental errors with 34 errors, which represented a 16% in general. In the next figure we can appreciate the distribution of errors according to the category.



Figure 2. Type of errors in the task

Source: Own elaboration

In the sixth and last place, we also divided each error category into different types. Thus, in the first category, *interlingual errors* were divided into the following eight types: addition of past tense, omission of preposition, addition of preposition, inappropriate noun phrase, verbnumber disagreement, inappropriate demonstrative, inappropriate preposition, and inappropriate pronoun. The most repeated type of error was the case of verb-number disagreement with 32 errors whilst the least repeated one was the addition of a past tense with just one instance. Other frequent interlingual errors were the use of an inappropriate noun phrase and the use of an inappropriate pronoun. In the following pie chart, we can acknowledge the distribution of types of interlingual errors in the task.





Source: Own elaboration

In the second place, *other errors* were divided into the following five types: addition of article, addition of plural marker, omission of progressive form, incorrect spelling, and addition of subject. If the most represented type was that of incorrect spelling with 30 cases, the least represented one was the omission of the progressive form with just 3 errors. Some other recurrent types were the addition of a plural marker and the addition of the article. We can appreciate it better in the following pie chart.





Source: Own elaboration

In the third place, *ambiguous errors* were divided into the following five types: omission of article, omission of subject, omission of object, inappropriate quantifier, and inappropriate article. Whilst the omission of the article, the omission of the subject and the use of an inappropriate quantifier were found in 10 cases each, on the other hand, the omission of the object was just encountered once as can be deduced from the following pie chart.



Chart 3: Distribution of types of ambiguous errors

Source: Own elaboration

Finally, *developmental errors* were divided into the following nine types: omission of auxiliary, omission of copula, omission of plural marker, omission of regular past tense marker, omission of irregular past tense marker, addition of irregular past, inappropriate part of speech, incorrect auxiliary, and omission of infinitive marker "to". Within developmental errors, the most frequent type was the use of an inappropriate part of speech with 10 cases altogether. On the other hand, the least frequent types were the omission of the irregular past tense marker, the addition of irregular past, and the use of an incorrect auxiliary with just one case each. Other types which were also recurring were the omission of a regular past tense marker, the omission of plural marker, as can be seen in the next pie chart.



Chart 4: Distribution of types of developmental errors



As a closing remark, we can finish withdrawing the main information collected along the study. The corpus of this research has been the analysis of errors in 52 essays written by technical engineering students during the last two academic years in a written assignment. And in order to do so, we followed the comparative taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen. The findings in these essays have demonstrated that the most recurrent category of errors detected was that of interlingual errors, followed by other errors and ambiguous errors. Finally, we placed developmental errors in the last position in the rank.

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