LEARNER ERRORS IN EFL WRITING:
A FOCUS ON SPANISH SECONDARY EDUCATION

Maria Dolores García-Pastor
Selisteán Teodora Rodica
Faculty of Education
University of Valencia
Introduction

Summary:

Research on L1 Spanish students’ errors in English as a foreign language (EFL) written assignments in Secondary Education, more specifically, the 2nd year of the so-called “Bachillerato” (12th grade in North-America, year 13 in British High School)
Theoretical background

- **Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**
  Error analysis (Corder, 1967; James, 1998; Richards, 1974) and transfer analysis (Selinker, 1972, 1983)

- **Second Language Writing (SLW)**
  Product-oriented v. process-oriented perspective on writing (Polio, 2003)
Theoretical background

- **Justification:**
  - Learner errors can provide useful information on students’ learning process (Ellis, 1985)
  - Teachers can better raise learners’ awareness of the features of the target language
  - Knowing more about learner errors can thus contribute to learners’ progress towards language proficiency

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Theoretical background

- **Basic concepts:**
  - **Learner language:** version of the target language which is used or known by the learner
  - **Errors & mistakes** (Corder, 1967; Council of Europe, 2001):
    - **Errors:** systematic distorted representations of the target competence inherent to language learning
    - **Mistakes:** errors of performance due to memory lapses, physical states or psychological conditions
Methods

Research questions:

- **RQ1.** Which are the most frequent errors in terms of transfer or intralingual errors in students’ written productions in EFL, and which are the linguistic categories most affected by them?

- **RQ2.** Does the length of the writing task have an influence in the quality of writing as regards the number of errors made?

- **RQ3.** Do time constraints have an influence on accuracy and on the variety of specific vocabulary used in writing tasks?
Methods

❖ **Subjects**

- 42 Spanish students
- Grade: 2\textsuperscript{nd} year of “Bachillerato” in Spanish Secondary Education (12\textsuperscript{th} grade 13 in North-America, year 13 in British High School)
- Level: A1/A2 of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001)

❖ **Data:**

- 56 opinion essays (incidental sample: 12 essays)
- Fieldnotes
- Spontaneous interviews with the students
Methods

- Analysis (Ellis, 2001):
  1. Error identification
  2. Error description (grammatical errors & other errors)
  3. Error explanation (Transfer analysis & intralingual errors)
RQ1: Which are the most frequent errors (transfer or intralingual) in students’ written productions in EFL, and which are the linguistic categories most affected by them?

- Intralingual errors outnumbered transfer errors.
- Morphology was the linguistic area most affected by errors on the whole, contrary to some research findings.
Results

**Morphology**: the linguistic category most affected by error
Results

• Intralingual errors outnumbered transfer errors in general

• **Morphology**: intralingual errors are the most frequent

• **Syntax and lexis**: transfer errors are the most frequent
RQ2: Does the length of the writing task have an influence in the quality of writing as regards the number of errors made?

- The percentage of error occurrence in shorter essays was higher than in longer essays.
- There is a relationship between students’ level of proficiency and the length of their essays.
- Longer essays revealed a higher level of proficiency.
The percentage of error occurrence in shorter essays was higher than in longer essays.

**Results**

*Errors in shorter essays vs. errors in longer essays*
RQ3: Do time constraints have an influence on accuracy and on the variety of specific vocabulary used in writing tasks?

- Yes, they do: learners’ linguistic accuracy in written assignments at home was superior to that of their written assignments in tests.
- Errors affected linguistic categories less in students’ texts at home than in students’ texts in tests.
Spanish Secondary Education learners in their 2\textsuperscript{nd} year of “Bachillerato”:

- mostly make intralingual v. transfer errors in EFL writing, which indicates a general decreasing reliance on L1
- most errors are morphological,
- morphological errors are mainly intralingual errors
- syntactic and lexical errors are mainly transfer errors, which signals greater reliance on L1 in these linguistic areas
Conclusions

(Cont.) Spanish Secondary Education learners in their 2\textsuperscript{nd} year of “Bachillerato”:

- write shorter essays if their level of proficiency is not high, making more errors in these essays

- write longer essays if their level of proficiency is high, making less errors in these essays

- show greater linguistic accuracy in their texts at home than in their texts in tests with errors affecting linguistic categories less in the former than in the latter
Conclusions

- **Implications of this study**
  - Teachers should foster learners’ development of morphology in this educational stage.
  - Teachers should work on syntax and lexis in a more contextualized and comprehensive manner, so that learners become less reliant on their L1.
  - Teachers should promote written assignments for homework in this educational stage.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION


