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'The Writing Skill: Error Taxonomies Revisited'

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Abstract

This research has its birthplace in the question of whether the types of mistakes that tend to appear more often in written production among students in the first year of teaching training courses in English are mentioned in the best widely known taxonomies that have been published so far. To that end, it becomes plausible to revise existent taxonomies which are used to analyse the mistakes in written output produced by intermediate and upper intermediate students of English as a foreign language. It has also been the pursuit of this study to devise a suitable taxonomy to be used for error analysis of written output produced by the students in the first year of the teaching training course. This study has been conducted in three colleges of education located in greater Buenos Aires. The results suggested the possibility of new classifications of errors, which appear to be more applicable and useful for first year teachers. The analysis has also reinforced the notion that teachers do not seem to have the same perception in terms of what types of errors they find to be the most frequent ones. It has also been observed that teachers tend to adopt different approaches to have their students reflect on their mistakes. Taxonomies appear to be conducive to more informed decisions in terms of resources because of their potential for anticipation of weaknesses on the part of students.

Key words: error correction techniques, taxonomy, types of mistakes, reflection on mistakes, frequent mistakes.

Resumen

Esta investigación intenta develar si los tipos de errores que tienden a aparecer con más frecuencia en la producción escrita de los alumnos de primer año del profesorado de inglés son mencionados en las taxonomías que han sido publicadas hasta el momento. Con ese objetivo en mente, se vuelve plausible revisar taxonomías existentes que suelen ser usadas para analizar los errores en la producción escrita de alumnos de inglés como lengua extranjera con un nivel intermedio o intermedio alto. Es también la ambición de este estudio el poder generar una taxonomía apropiada para ser usada con fines de análisis de errores entre los alumnos de primer año en el primer año de profesorado. La siguiente investigación ha sido llevada a cabo en tres profesorados ubicados en el Gran Buenos Aires. Los resultados sugirieron la posibilidad de nuevas clasificaciones de errores, que parecen ser más aplicables y útiles para los profesores de primer año. Esta investigación adicionalmente ha reforzado la perspectiva de que los docentes tienden a usar enfoques variados al momento de llamar a la reflexión sobre los errores cometidos. Las taxonomías parecen ser herramientas que ayudan a forjar decisiones más informadas a la hora de elegir recursos para capacitar por su gran potencial para anticipar debilidades en los alumnos.

Palabras clave: técnicas de corrección, taxonomía, tipos de errores, reflexión sobre los errores, errores frecuentes

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The Writing Skill: Error Taxonomies Revisited

1.- Introduction

This research study has its inception in the reportedly high frequency of appearance with which certain mistakes emerge in written output produced by the students of first year in teaching training courses in Buenos Aires Province. When the time comes for teachers in charge of the subject to plan lessons and select materials, these instructors are faced with established parameters to be followed in the texts they make use of for that level. The results that these courses yield do not appear to be satisfactory at times and, as a result, it becomes plausible to reflect on whether the types of mistakes that tend to appear more often in written production among students in the first year of this course of study are fully regarded in the best widely known taxonomies that have been published so far.

This survey is informed by the following research questions:

1.-To what extent does an error taxonomy help in the analysis of mistakes found in the written production of advanced students at the three given colleges of education selected?

2.- To what extent can new, reduced error taxonomy/taxonomies help in the analysis of mistakes found in the written production of advanced students at the three given colleges of education selected?

This query gives rise to the following hypotheses:

1.-The existence of error taxonomies helps in the analysis of mistakes found in the written production of advanced students at the three given colleges of education selected, and

2.- The appearance of (a) new, reduced error taxonomy/taxonomies helps in the analysis of mistakes found in the written production of advanced students at the three given colleges of education selected.

This research study sets out to:

1.- Revise existent taxonomies which are used to analyse the mistakes in written output produced by intermediate and upper intermediate students of English as a foreign language.

2.- Devise a suitable taxonomy to be used for error analysis in written output produced by the students in the first year of the teaching training course.

2.- Methodology

2.1.- Generalities

This study has been conducted in three colleges of education located in greater Buenos Aires. The analysed content has been extracted from the written production created by the students in the first year at teaching training course. All pieces have been produced using a random sampling technique. As regards the teachers of such institutions, all instructors delivering courses in English at first year were sent surveys.

Each and every one of the members of the two groups of teachers was surveyed. In the case of the teachers administering English Language I, the survey was made up of five questions, whereas the survey that the teachers of the rest of the subjects of first year were to answer was comprised of three questions.

All three questions in the survey to be filled in by all the teachers from first year were the very same questions of the survey directed at the English Language I teachers. English Language I teachers were additionally asked two further questions that were exclusively connected to foreign language teaching. One of them was centred on the resources that English Language I teachers resorted to for the correction of mistakes and the other one revolved

around their perception of the use of taxonomies to be implemented with the same purpose.

The written output produced by the students of English Language I from both institutions was randomly selected at three points in time throughout the academic year: at the beginning, midway through it and at the end of the year.

For the sake of simplicity, throughout this study, errors and mistakes will be treated as the same concept, since the typical distinction between them will be only clarified in the presentation of the literature review.

2.2.- Probing into students' written production

English Language I teachers from both institutions were asked to select some pieces written by their students at three different moments throughout the year. They were told to do so before reading and correcting these pieces to keep instructors from choosing written texts with fewer mistakes or texts in which certain types of mistakes were more or less prevalent.

Once the written output was submitted, a first reading with an eye to pinpointing mistakes in the targeted pieces was conducted. Then, every mistake was transcribed onto a list with the ulterior objective of its classification and categorization.

2.3.- Surveys on teachers

In question number one, the surveyed parties were asked to create a table to quantify the frequency with which these mistakes take place, based on a chart that enumerates eleven different types of mistakes that are likely to emerge in the first year of such course. In such chart, teachers are to write number 1 next to the description of the most frequent mistake and number 12 next to the least common mistake. Although it is true that there are eleven types of mistakes listed in the table, the attention of the teachers is drawn to the fact that they are to assign values ranging from 1 to 12 since one of the descriptions of the possible mistakes falls into the category: miscellaneous. Teachers are encouraged to use this category to think of possible kinds of mistakes that the interviewer has neglected to include in such chart.

A	Syntactic Mistakes in nominal phrases/ pronominal phrases and determiners
B	Spelling Mistakes
C	Mistakes in terms of graphic conventions (citation, capitalization, indentation)
D	Syntactic mistakes in verbal phrases (verbs, auxiliaries, modal verbs, etc)
E	Syntactic mistakes in adjectival and adverbial phrases
F	Syntactic mistakes in prepositional phrases
G	Mistakes in punctuation
H	Mistakes in terms of linking devices
I	Mistakes in Word formation (prefixes and suffixes in conjugations, comparative adjectives, compound nouns, etc)

J	Semantic mistakes
K	Mistakes in terms of pragmatics (paragraphing, cohesion, coherence, etc)
L	Miscellaneous (please, exemplify and describe briefly)

Table 1: Mistakes typology

In question number 2, the surveyed teachers are expected to describe the extent to which they believe the most frequent mistakes in their students' written production compromise the communicative potential and overall quality of their work. The types of mistakes mentioned in the question are: punctuation mistakes, spelling mistakes, syntactic mistakes, semantic mistakes, pragmatic mistakes (cohesion and coherence). The said values to be assigned to such mistakes by the participants of the surveys are: to a great extent, partially, very slightly.

In question number 3, they are asked to state whether devising a taxonomy with the most recurrent mistakes made by the students of the first year in teacher training college in their written output could be regarded as a useful resource to help these students to enhance their writing skills. The possible options to this question are: very useful, useful, slightly useful.

Questions 4 and 5 are only to be asked of English Language I teachers. Question number 4 is an open-ended question. The participants are expected to describe three practices or strategies they make use of to correct the most frequent mistakes found in the written output of their English Language I

students. Teachers are asked to enumerate their answers by assigning 1 (one) to the most widely used and 3 (three) to the least frequently implemented practice.

Question number 5 is intended to delve into the thoughts and reflections of these teachers in connection with the impact they feel a taxonomy of mistakes would have on the written production of their students. The possible answers to such question are: (a) it would allow them to anticipate mistakes, (b) it would enable them to uproot mistakes, (c) it would get them equipped with self-correction techniques, and (d) other options (interviewees were asked to briefly describe these options). In this question, teachers are said that they can choose more than one possible option.

3.- Literature Review: Error in Error Analysis and English Language Teaching

3.1.- Now, is this an “error” or a “mistake”?

Although error has been thoroughly defined in Error Analysis (EA) research and in English Language Teaching (ELT), interpretations and usage of this term for the purpose of providing corrective feedback have not been systematic. Experts in the field of error analysis have written extensively on what constitutes an error.

Thus, in order to better understand learner language, it becomes useful to draw a distinction between these two terms, which are technically two distinct phenomena, as will be appreciated hereafter a very authoritative figure in the field of Error Analysis (EA), makes a distinction between error and mistake. Indeed, Corder’s work “The Significance of Learners’ Errors” provides relevant information for teachers, researchers and learners. Corder (1967) establishes a distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors. As viewed by him, unsystematic errors occur in one’s mother tongue. He refers to them as mistakes and considers them insignificant in language learning. Indeed, native speakers will instantly recognize and probably correct any lapses or slips for the simple reason that these are not caused by a deficiency

in competence. There is perhaps good reason to believe that such ungrammaticalities occur in L2. This is clearly corroborated by Corder (1967), who ascertains that “the errors of performance will characteristically be unsystematic” (p.166). Errors, on the other hand, are systematic and reveal a learner’s underlying knowledge of the language to date. Corder defines these deviations as “errors of competence and labels them as persistent and serious so that they demand treatment” (p. 166).

Other researchers have approached the notion of error in more specific ways. Brown (1994) describes errors as “idiosyncrasies in the interlanguage of the learner which are a direct manifestation of a system within which a learner is operating at a time” (p.194). Long (1991) regards errors as ill-formed target language learning forms that can still be remedied although they may be recurrent and pervasive.

Hendrickson (1978) restricts the definition of an error in the field of FLT (Foreign Language Teaching) to “an utterance, form or structure that a particular language teacher deems unacceptable because of its inappropriateness in real-life discourse” (p.366).

A further element postulated by researchers to draw a difference between errors and mistakes has to do with how frequently deviations occur. Once more, in this sense, low-frequency errors are considered performance errors or slips, while high-frequency errors are dubbed systematic or

competence errors. Again, controversies arise in this area. Some researchers (Brown, 1994; Corder, 1981; Ellis, 1995; James, 1998) argue that the frequency with which a deviation occurs is not a viable criterion to tell an error from a mistake. In this respect, Schachter (1974) states that “some learners may resort to an avoidance strategy so that there will be a low instance of certain errors” (p. 206). Schachter claims that too much emphasis has been laid on what learners “will do” and much less on what learners “actually do”. To this end, Schachter sheds light on the many difficulties encountered by researchers in predicting the type of errors students are bound to commit and which teachers are expected to pay the closest attention to by teaching those linguistic patterns which are candidates for backsliding. As viewed by Schachter (1974), this approach is based on the assumption that the difficulty of a linguistic form is determined by its frequency of occurrence.

It would seem then that teachers might have to decide on what constitutes a learner’s error or a learner’s mistake, since this distinction may have strong implications at the moment of addressing errors in students’ writing. More often than not, the word error is used as an umbrella term which is assumed to involve the notion of mistake. On this issue, Johnson (as cited in Lee, 1997) posits that “techniques for addressing students’ errors seem more at hand to teachers than techniques for handling students’ mistakes, since many practitioners do not accept that L2 learners make mistakes at all”

(p. 58). This would have a strong bearing in theory. Yet, recent research suggests that EFL students make both mistakes and errors (Ellis, 1985).

3.3.- Causes behind Error in EFL Writing: A multiplicity of perspectives

Researchers and experts in Error Analysis (EA) have drawn attention to the multiplicity of factors underlying error occurrence in ESL and EFL. Although much of what has been published on error correction depends largely on speculation and is in need of empirical validation (Hendrickson, 1977), the body of literature on the causes of error deserves some analysis if it is to be translated into better classrooms practices.

In the Contrastive Analysis (CA) period, the only source of error recognition was interference from the learner's mother tongue in the process of learning the target language. In diagnosing errors, James (1998) considers ignorance of the target language item aimed at as the ultimate cause of an error. Thus, a learner will borrow an L1 substitute which will provoke the transfer. James further explains that when a learner knows the target language item but fails to produce it, and instead uses an L1 substitute, there exists what he labels an interference mistake. Brooks (1960) recognizes four error

causalities: learners may not have sufficient knowledge of a structure, and this may lead them to resort to an ancillary response; the learner may have had insufficient drilling of the correct pattern; the deviation may be “induced” by the mother tongue; the learner may apply a general rule which does not fit a particular pattern.

Kadia (as cited in Truscott, 1996) believes that “learners may acquire good intellectual knowledge of the target language but may still lack the ability to use this knowledge” (p.346). Harley (as cited in Truscott, 1996) states that “testing and observation show that knowledge which students have apparently acquired may disappear in a matter of minutes, probably indicating that the teaching has produced nothing more than pseudo learning” (p. 347).

Throughout the Cognitive period of language instruction, the sources of errors were viewed quite differently. In fact, L1 interference was but one of several reasons why a learner commits errors. Selinker (1972) coined the term “interlanguage” to describe a learner’s constructing a linguistic system that relies only in part on his mother tongue, but such a system is also different from the L1 as it is from the target language. As viewed by Selinker, a learner’s interlanguage is “a unique system which is produced progressively until the target language has been mastered” (p. 223). Ellis (1997) states that “this linguistic system suggests a transition on a continuum which is open from the outside and also from the inside” (p. 342). As a consequence, language acquisition may not be linear, and it may be influenced or propelled forward

through instruction. By the same token, in the learning process, students are bound to formulate over-generalized rules. They may even feel uncertain of what they intend to communicate, and in so doing, they will inevitably use deviant linguistic forms.

According to McLaughlin, (as cited in Myles, 2002), transfer errors can occur because “learners lack the necessary information in the second language or the attention capacity to activate the appropriate second-language routine. But such observation says little about why certain linguistic forms transfer and others do not” (p.7).

Errors in composing may be viewed from a wider spectrum in the light of what is known about second language acquisition. The scenario is complex. Just like a second language student’s writing will contain surface errors; it will also be the case that such writing will contain rhetorical errors. Myles (2002) proclaims that the more students invest in producing texts which are rich in both content and creativity, the greater the chances will be that such pieces will contain morphological and syntactic deviances. Thus, unskilled L2 writers need to master rhetorical and organizational skills which may not be similar to those of their mother tongue.

In view of the aforementioned distinctions and contentions, current writing corrective procedures may thus be in need of revision because of the

pedagogical implications for teachers and students alike, and these matters will be addressed in the next chapter.

3.4.- Mistakes taxonomized

At present, taxonomies and research studies on the nature of mistakes tend to have a very global perspective and in most cases stem from investigations conducted into the teaching of English as a second language.

Andersen (2011) stresses the importance of surface level structure taxonomies that do not involve grammatical categories. Along the same lines, Fitkides (1936) focuses on the lexical dimension to language and elucidates 5 categories: (1) Element (wrong preposition or wrong tense); (2) Wrong omission of an element (prepositions, auxiliaries, morphemes, etc); (3) Surface level words (articles, prepositions, etc); (4) Wrong word order (adverbs and adjectives placement.)and (5) Wrong lexical item (wrong noun, wrong words or language transfer mistakes).

Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) subscribe to the aforementioned taxonomies and they arrive at the conclusion that mistakes are caused by omission, unnecessary addition, wrong word order or ill-formed lexis.

Andersen believes that taxonomies are sometimes frowned upon because they fail to acknowledge sentences as hierarchical structures and they just treat them as a set of words. Yet, these taxonomies are still being implemented as a result of their usefulness and the fact that some speakers think and operate in the same fashion. This author goes on to present taxonomies whose classification is centred on linguistic categories, and within them, he mentions the ones that were developed by Burt and Kiparsky (1972), which are based on syntax.

1. Clausal skeleton
2. Auxiliaries
3. Passive voice
4. Temporal conjunctions
5. Sentential complements
6. Psychological predicates

Additionally, Andersen makes a distinction between local errors, which are regarded as easy to spot or correct (spelling, etc) and global mistakes, which are harder to pinpoint (e.g. discursive mistakes).

The taxonomies that have been devised so far tend to have one limitation: it cannot be determined under what category mistakes are supposed to be classified with precision. Andersen himself asserts that a mistake like: “friend his” can be typified as an omission mistake because that utterance is

lacking in a preposition. However, that very mistake can also be labelled as a syntagmatic mistake. The measure that this author intends to put forward implies building a taxonomy of mistakes that brings with it the end of overlapping in terms of categories since he believes that most of the taxonomies in existence are abundant in categories that are far from being clear cut.

James, in his analysis *Errors in Language Learning and Use* (1998) presents a very thorough taxonomy with a very big number of categories:

- a- Nominal errors: a.1 mechanical mistakes (punctuation, typography, dyslexia-related, confusable elements) a.2 Spelling mistakes (as a result of errors in pronunciation or wrong decoding) .
- b- Textual errors: b.1 Lexical errors (false cognates, confusable words,) b.2 Semantic errors in lexis: in terms of meaning construction: hyponyms, paronyms/homophones, etc. errors in complements b.3 morphological errors, b.4 syntactic errors: sentence construction, errors in propositions and on sentence level (subordination and coordination), errors on intersentential level, reference, substitution, ellipsis, etc.
- c- Discourse errors: c.1 errors in coherence (topic, logical connections, sequences); c.2 errors in pragmatics (social scale, relationships of power, taboo language, register, etc).

In what does time buy? ESL student performance on home versus class compositions, B. Kroll (1994) analyses syntactic-level errors in one hundred written argumentative pieces composed by advanced ESL students. The findings yielded by this study result in the following errors taxonomy:

Sentence level errors

1. Run-on sentences
2. Subject formation
3. Lack of verb
4. Verb complement or objective complement
5. Confusion between prepositional phrase and to-infinitive
6. Modifier lacking in nominal phrase
7. Lack of cohesion
8. Parallel construction
9. Relative clauses formation
10. Word order
11. Odd words
12. Unconventional phrasing
13. Awkward words
14. Unconventional phrasing

Verbal errors

- 15. Tense
- 16. Voice
- 17. Suffixation and derivation
- 18. Subject Agreement
- 19. Multiword verbs

Reference level errors

- 20. Noun/pronoun mismatch
- 21. Quantifier/noun mismatch
- 22. Errors in the pronominal chain
- 23. Vagueness
- 24. Point of view

Errors in lexical choices

- 25. in terms of phrases
- 26. idiomatic expressions
- 27. in terms of number: singular and plural
- 28. quantifiers
- 29. prepositions

Errors in articles

- 30. omission/error/duplication

Errors in punctuation

31. Omission/ error/ duplication

As a result of the technological advancement taking place over the last few years, error analysis has been improved due to faster and more efficient digital compilation techniques. It has also become simpler for students to label, categorize and describe errors with an eye to building a corpus out of them. Computerized analysis has been enriched by the natural contributions made by students, which are based on systematic criteria and serve as the substance with which taxonomies with observable data are filled. These representative subjectivity-free taxonomies are highly comprehensible and reflect the interlanguage of students as a consequence of its contextualization.

A list of taxonomies that appear in Andersen's publications (2011) on grammatical errors prediction will be presented as follows. These taxonomies, which are mainly focused on a computerized study of errors, are very useful in that they assist the tasks of predicting, spotting, correcting and analysing written output by EFL students.

The taxonomy put forward by Izumi, Uchimoto e Isahara (2004) classifies errors in the following fashion:

NOUNS

Inflection

Number

Case

Countable/uncountable

Presence/omission of complement

Lexis

VERBS

Inflection

Subject-verb agreement

Morphology

Tense

Aspect

Voice

Finite and non-finite forms

Negative forms

Interrogative forms

Verb complements

Lexis

MODAL VERBS

Lexis

ADJECTIVES

Inflection

Comparative and superlative

Number

Quantifiers

Relative complements

Lexis

ADVERBS

Inflection

Comparative and superlative

Lexis

PREPOSITIONS

Prepositional complements

Choice of the right preposition

Compound or complex prepositions

ARTICLES

Article

PRONOUNS

Case

Inflection

Gender and number agreement

Lexis

CONJUNCTIONS

Lexis

RELATIVE PRONOUNS

Lexis

Case

INTERROGATIVE PRONOUNS

Lexis

Case

MISCELLANEOUS

Mother tongue interference

Collocation mistakes

Uncategorized/ unknown mistakes

Intelligibility

In contrast with the criteria laid down by the taxonomy created by Izumi et al, ICLE/Louvain (as published in Lightbound, 2005, in Andersen, 2011) highlights the importance of classifying errors according to the following rationale

MORPHOLOGY

Graphics

Spelling errors

Missing punctuation

GRAMMAR

Articles

Adjectives: comparative and superlative degree

Adjectives: number

Adjectives: order

Adverbs: order

Nouns: case

Nouns: number

Pronouns

Auxiliary verbs

Verbs: morphology

Verbs: number

Verbs: conjugated/ non conjugated

Verbs: tense

Verbs: voice

Word types

LEXIS

Coordinating conjunctions

Subordinate conjunctions

Simple conjunctions

Compound conjunctions

Logical conjunctions

False cognates

REGISTER

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STYLE

Incomplete

Unclear

WORDING

Missing word

Redundancy

Wrong order

LEXICAL/GRAMMATICAL

Relative complements

Prepositions before adjectives

Nominal complements

Prepositions after nouns

Countable and uncountable nouns

Prepositional complements

Verbal complements

Prepositions after verbs

Complements for conjunctions

The taxonomy that Ganger (2003) puts forward in free error taxonomy includes the following categories:

Mechanics (homophones, spelling mistakes, capitalization, etc)

Morphology (derivation, inflexion, compound words)

Grammar (types of words, auxiliaries, gender, subject verb agreement, number, tense, etc)

Lexis (verbal complements, nominal complements, relative complements, etc)

Syntax (duplication of noun phrases, omission of noun phrases, cohesion, etc)

Register (in lexis and syntax)

Style (obscure, dense)

Punctuation (confusion, redundancy, omission)

Typographic errors

Burt and Kiparsky's taxonomy (1972) classifies categories in the following manner:

Propositional structure (wrong order, omission)

Verbs and auxiliaries (do, have, be, modal verbs, embedded questions)

Passive voice

Temporal conjunctions (following a proposition, with predicative value, in superficial agreement with the verbal tense, in the wrong position)

Complements (subordinate propositions, no- conjugated forms: infinitival and gerundial forms, different types of verbal complements)

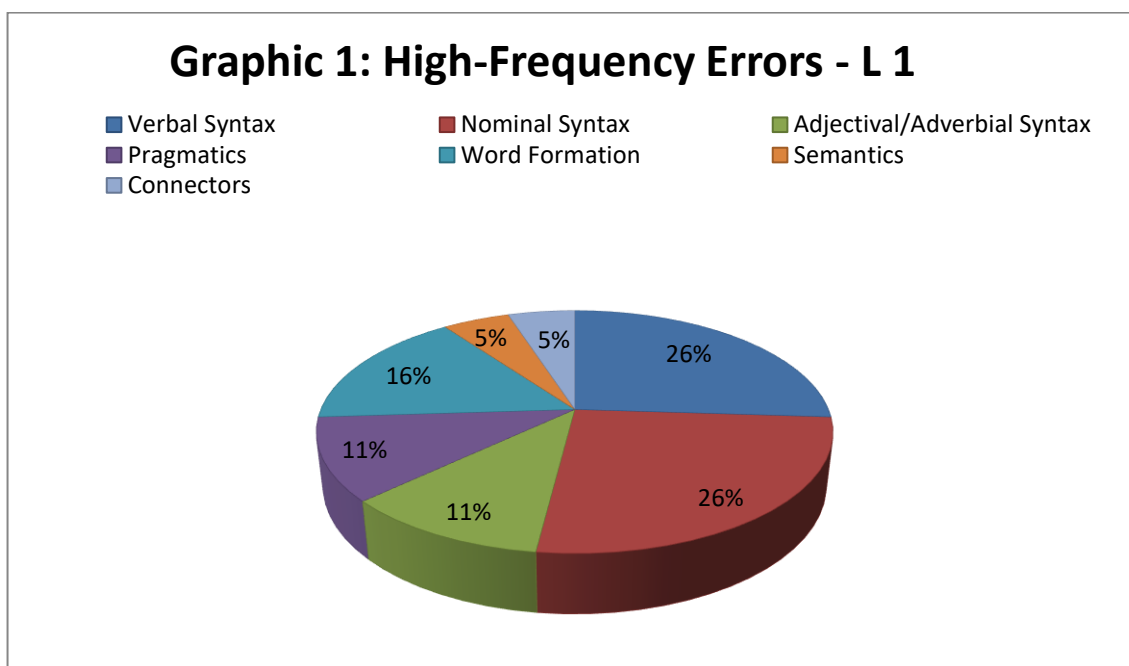
Psychological predicates, (subject-object inversion, inversion in adjectival and verbal phrases)

4.- Results and interpretation

4.1.- Surveys undertaken by English Language I teachers

The question probing into the types of errors that tend to occur with the highest degree of frequency in written output among English Language I students has been helpful to identify three existing levels of frequency of appearance: high frequency, intermediate and low frequency of appearance. The errors that were ranked with the values 1,2,3 or 4 in the survey were categorized as high frequency; if errors were ranked with the values 4,6,7 or 8, they fell into the category of intermediate frequency and in the low frequency of occurrence group lay those ranked as 9, 10 or 11.

It has also been determined that within the high frequency group, the errors with the highest degree of recurrence are of syntactic nature occurring in the verbal phrase (26%) and in the nominal phrase (26%). The errors stemming from word formation (prefixes and suffixes) amounted to 16%. Within the same high frequency group of errors, it has been found that syntactic errors in the adjectival or adverbial phrase as well as pragmatics related errors (connectors) added up to 11% each. The type of error to have been represented as the one with the lowest frequency of appearance is the one having to do with connectors and semantics (5% each).

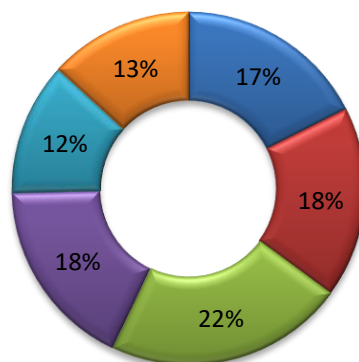


Graph 1: High-Frequency Errors English Language I

In terms of intermediate frequency errors, (those ranked by interviewees as 5,6,7 or 8) it can be asserted that the errors with the highest frequency of appearance are the orthographic ones (23%) and the syntactic errors in propositional phrases (%18). To a lesser degree, within the same group of intermediate frequency errors, syntactic error in adjectival and adverbial phrases amount to 14%.and are followed by errors in graphic conventions (%9).

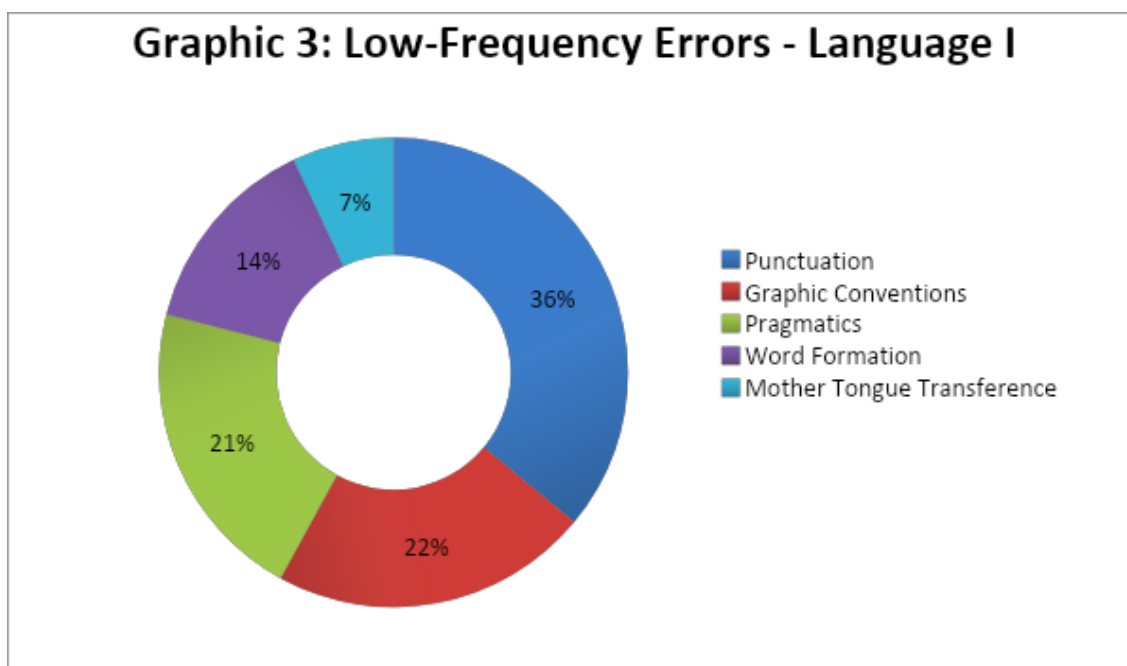
Graphic 2: Mid-Frequency errors - L 1

■ Connectors ■ Prepositional Syntax ■ Spelling
■ Semantics ■ Graphic Conventions ■ Adj/Adv. Syntax



Graph 2: Mid-Frequency Errors in English Language I

Within the low frequency errors group, the most recurrent errors were connected with punctuation (36%), the ones stemming from faulty graphic conventions (22%) and the ones related to pragmatics (21%). Word formation-related mistakes: prefixes and suffixes amounted to 14% and mother language transfer errors only comprised 7 % of the total number of errors within this subgroup.



Graph 3: Low-frequency Errors English Language I

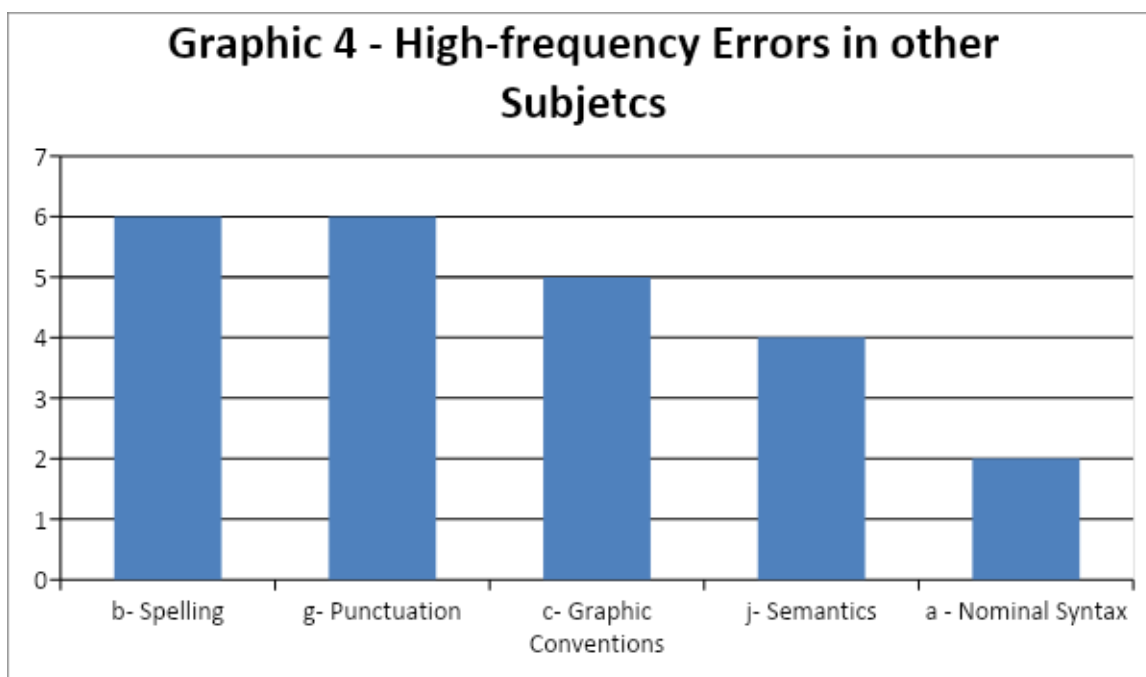
It becomes relevant to point out that the answers fed into the surveys do not reveal a consistent tendency in terms of the value placed on every kind of mistake by the surveyed teachers given that the very same type of mistake is classified as a high frequency error as well as low frequency one. As a result, it has been deemed useful to group these segmentations with an eye to elucidate whether there is another possible approach to the gathered information. The answers fed into the surveys were divided into two groups: group A (errors taking place with an intermediate or high frequency) and group B (errors taking place with a low frequency)

The results yielded from this new consideration of the surveys are as follows. The errors deemed to have had an intermediate or high frequency of appearance are the following ones:

- a) Verbal syntax errors, spelling and punctuation,
- b) Nominal syntax errors, connectors, prepositional syntax,
- c) Adverbial/adjectival syntax errors, errors in semantics, pragmatics related errors, errors in mechanics.

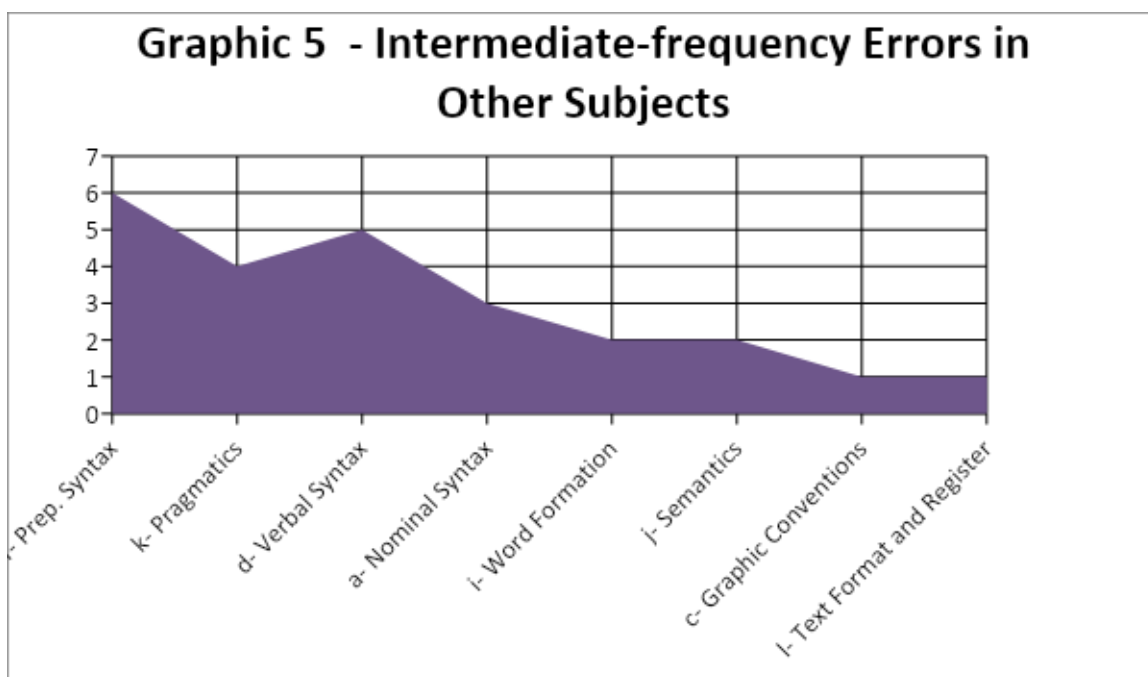
4.2.- Surveys undertaken by teachers of first-year subjects other than English Language I

In the light of what has been pointed out by the teachers of 1st year subjects in the teaching training course, the most frequent errors (the ones ranked as 1,2,3 or 4) have been found to be spelling mistakes and punctuation (26,05 % in each case), errors because of failure to comply with other orthographic conventions (21,7%), semantics related errors (17,4%) and to a lesser degree, errors in nominal syntax (8,7%).



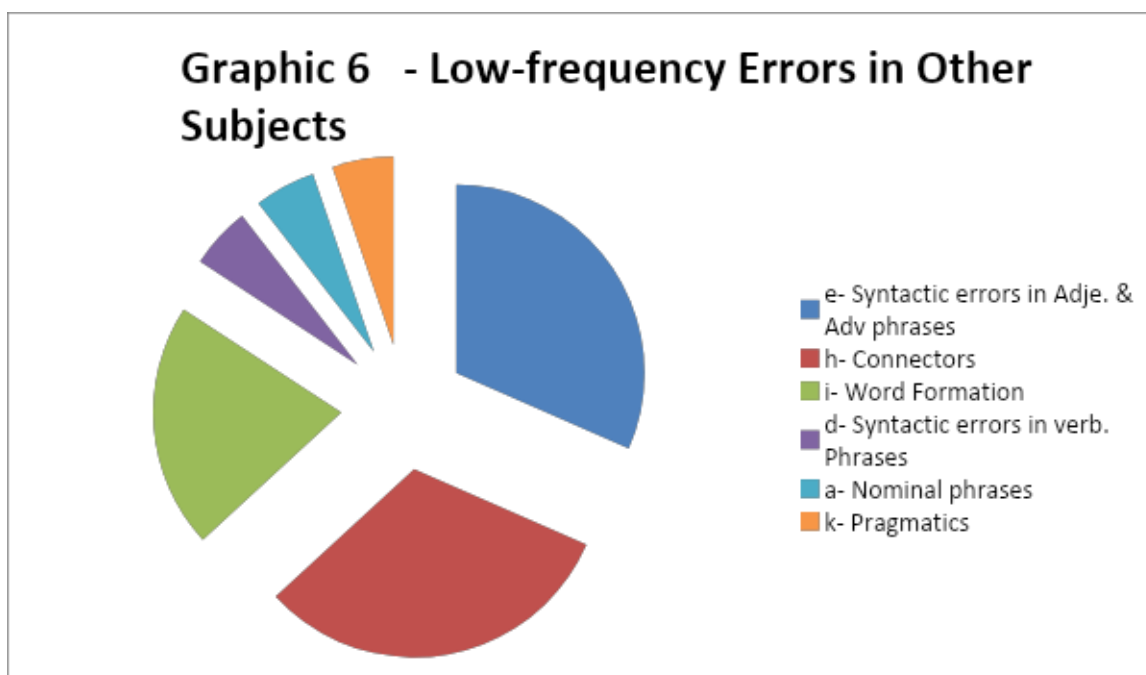
Graphic 4: High-frequency errors (other subjects)

On the other hand, in terms of intermediate frequency errors, it can be stated that the most recurrent errors were the ones in prepositional syntax (25%) followed by the ones in verbal syntax (20,8%) and the pragmatics related ones (16.6%). To a lesser degree, the syntactic errors in nominal phrases amount to 12,5%. Within the group with the lowest rate of appearance one can find: semantic errors and word formation errors (8.3% in each case). Errors that stem from failure to comply with graphic conventions, text format and register got the lowest rate (4,16% in each case)



Graphic 5: Mid-frequency errors (other subjects)

When the focus is placed on the errors with a low frequency of appearance, it has been observed that the most prevalent errors are the ones of syntactic nature found in adjectival phrases and adverbial phrases as well the ones related with the use of connectors(31.5% in each case). Word formation related errors comprised 21 % of the cases. As regards the errors with the lowest rate of appearance, it has been observed that syntactic errors in verbal phrases, nominal phrases and in pragmatics share the same rate (5.3%)



Graphic 6: Low-frequency errors (other subjects)

Besides the fact that teachers undergoing the survey were asked to rate the categories presented in the questionnaires in question 1, they were also requested to include, if they deem that necessary, some other category that had not been highlighted by the research in the list of possible errors. They were also asked to rate that new category in the same fashion as the rest of them.

English Language I teachers ascertained that other error categories that tend to be present in written production by their students are:

- Comprehension errors
- Word order

- Mother tongue transfer errors

The teachers of the rest of the subjects in first year mentioned the following errors

- Errors in linking devices
- Errors in sentence structure
- Errors in mechanics
- Errors in register (formal/informal)

The categories that were suggested by the interviewees were ranked in terms of frequency in only one of the cases. The rest of the surveyed teachers did not number their contributions.

These new categories of errors that teachers contributed suggest the existence of certain types of errors that appear to be abundant among first year students: errors in sentence structure (errors stemming from the arrangement of the different elements of a sentence) and errors in terms of the choice of linking devices. It is important to clarify that on a linguistic level these mistakes as regards linkers derive from the differences between coordinating and subordinating conjunctions since many students at this level are not familiar with the distinctive features of each one of them yet.

A further category of errors that was presented by the interviewees is the one connected with errors as a result of the influence of one's mother tongue. Many of these errors are lexical in nature, others take place on a

structural level. The latter are the most prevalent since, even though the target language and the students' mother tongue tend to have many similar structures, there are many instances of no resemblance whatsoever and it is in these cases of no correspondence that students tend to fall back on structures belonging to their mother tongue. A typical error stems from the fact that in English all sentences should be formulated with the mention of an explicit subject if the verb is conjugated, while in Spanish, it is possible to omit the subject of a sentence. Hence students tend to neglect to mention the subject in sentences in English both in oral and written production.

The categories of errors to have had the lowest rate of frequency, according to the interviewees, are the ones having to do with errors on a textual level and register as well as comprehension in terms of the rubrics to be observed as regards topic or format. Needless to say, that failure to fully understand the required writing tasks will result in errors in register and format.

Just as it has been the case with the information fed into this study coming from the surveys undertaken by English Language I teachers, the answers coming from the teachers of other subjects were also subdivided into two groups: group A (high-/mid-frequency errors) and group B (low frequency errors)

The results were as follows: the errors that were regarded as high/intermediate frequency errors by the teachers of the rest of the subjects of first year were:

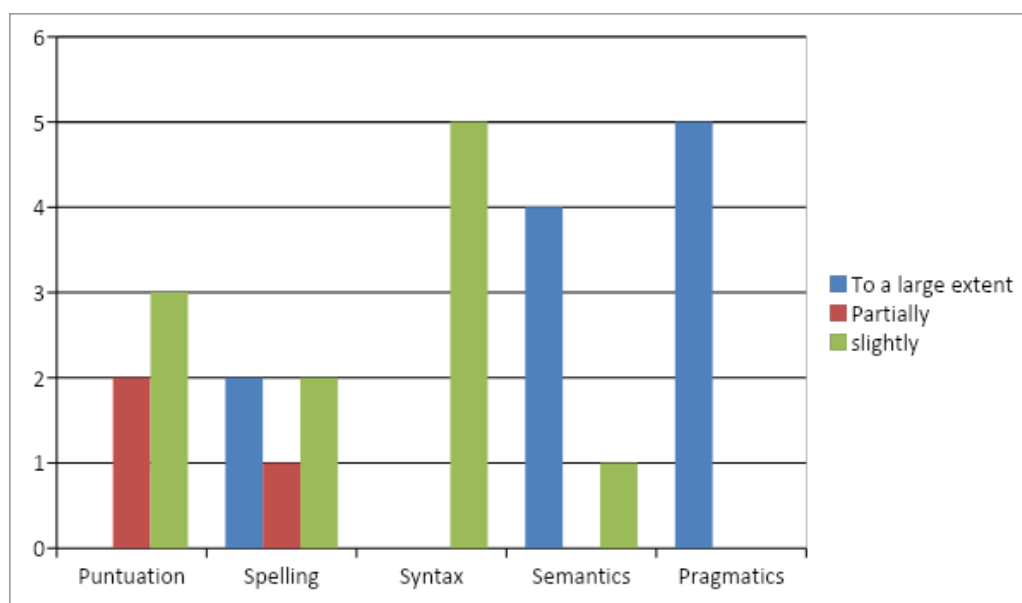
- I. Spelling errors, punctuation, mechanics, prepositional syntax and semantic errors
- II. Errors in nominal and verbal syntax, errors in pragmatics
- III. Errors in morphology and in paragraphing and register

If the results yielded by the surveys conducted on English Language I teachers are compared with the ones coming from the rest of the teachers, some discrepancies emerge in terms of what errors are thought to be more recurrent. While English Language I teachers placed more importance on the grammatical errors (errors in verbal, nominal, prepositional, adjectival and adverbial syntax), the teachers of the rest of the subjects tend to find more errors in other aspects of language like spelling, punctuation, semantics.

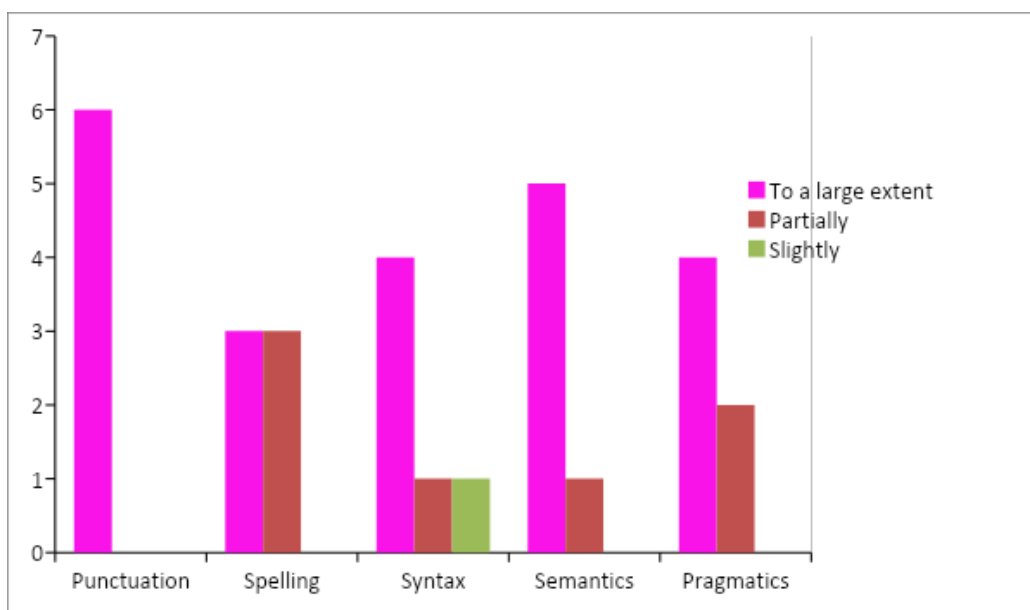
In question number 2, the interviewees were asked to describe the extent to which they thought certain recurrent errors present in writing activities in English Language I affect communication and the overall quality of the final product. Three options were given to them: to a great extent, partially and very slightly. These degrees were to be applied to the following types of errors: punctuation, spelling, syntax, semantics, pragmatics (coherence and cohesion)

The teachers asserted that the errors that were found to be highly disruptive as regards communication and overall quality of the final production of 1st year students were semantics and pragmatics related, while the teachers of the other subjects of first year ascertained that those errors compromising communication and the overall quality of the written output of students had to do with punctuation, semantics and to a lesser degree, syntactic and pragmatic errors.

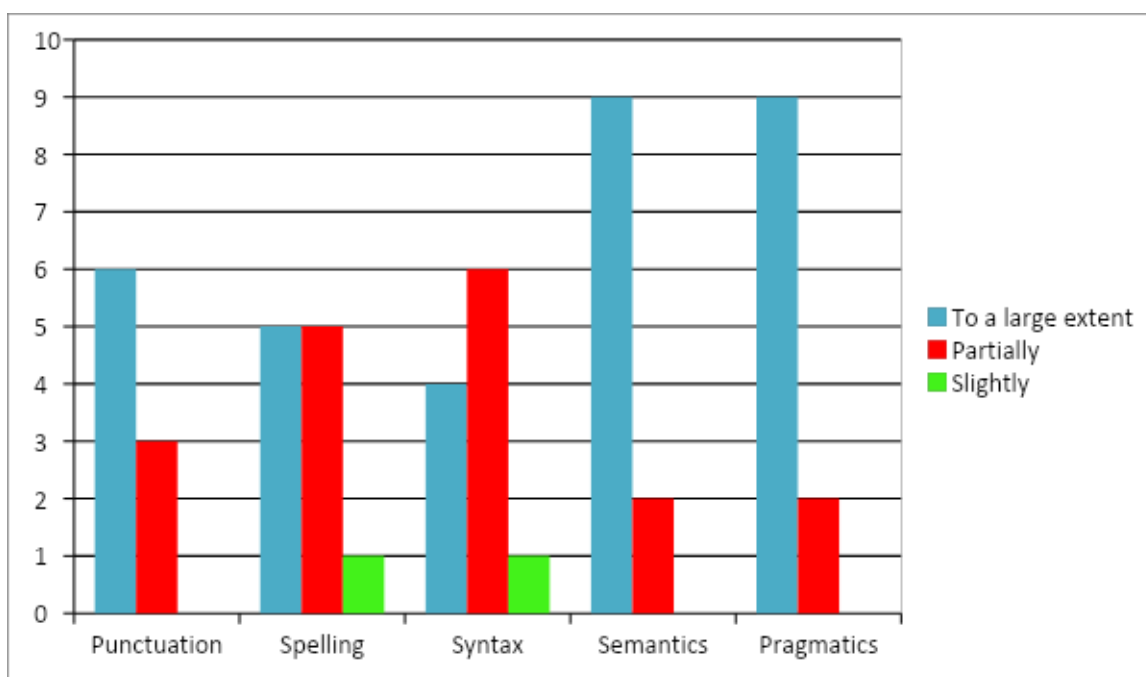
On average, if all the answers coming from all first-year teachers are considered, the results will be that the most impactful errors are the ones on a semantic and pragmatic level. Punctuation errors are trailing behind them in the second position rendering punctuation errors as the most innocuous ones.



Graph 7: Language I teachers' perceptions



Graphic 8: Perceptions of Teachers of Other Subjects



Graphic 9: Perceptions of Teachers in General

It could be affirmed that if the answers of the first part of the interview (Question 1) in the survey undertaken by the teachers of both universities are compared with the results yielded by the research conducted on the written output by the students in English Language I, the data seems somewhat contradictory.

In sum, the errors that were found to be most frequent in written output in English Language I are of the syntactic kind, mostly present in the verbal phrase, the nominal phrase and the prepositional phrase. There is a high degree of correlation between this finding and the answers of English Language I teachers to question number 1. However, this observation runs counter to the perception expressed by the teachers of the rest of the subjects, who agreed on the assertion that the most prevalent errors had to do with spelling, punctuation and semantics.

It is plausible to assume that since among the set of options presented in the surveys there is no clear mention of each type of error (as is the case in question 1), the interviewees overlooked the fact that the label “syntax” can be used as a synonym of “grammatical”. This could have resulted in teachers’ classifying syntax errors as low frequency ones.

Question number 3 asked of the interviewees (both teachers of English Language I and the teachers of the rest of the subjects) whether the creation of a taxonomy of errors to be applied in the written production of English

Language I students in their first year at teacher training college would be helpful for them to improve their written output. The possible answers to that question were: very useful, useful, hardly useful.

	English Language I Teachers	Teachers of other Subjects	Total
Very useful	4	4	8 (73%)
Useful	1	2	3 (27%)
Hardly useful	-	-	-

Table 2: Taxonomies Usefulness

As can be seen in Table 2, the answers coming from the survey denote a tendency for teachers to regard taxonomies as a useful resource since 73% of the teachers undertaking this questionnaire believe that creating a survey could be very useful, while nobody went for the “hardly useful” option.

In question number 4, in the survey that was undertaken by English Language I teachers, they were asked to explain what pedagogic strategies they made use of to deal with the most frequent errors they encountered when correcting students output. They were also expected to rate them in terms of frequency (number one being the most frequent one and number three the least frequent one).

4.3.- Teaching Strategies

	Most frequently used	Partially used	Least frequently used
1	Correcting errors on blackboard	Doing exercises involving error-spotting	Peer review
2	Using correction codes	Highlighting sentences containing errors (without signalling the type of error)	
3	Providing the right version for the student to compare	Referring student to course materials	having students rewrite the ill-formed language

Table 3: Error-correction Strategies

As can be seen, the criteria to approach errors are dissimilar. In some cases the interviewees concur that they find it useful to use a correction code. This is a very common resource among language teachers that involves signalling errors in the margin of the piece presented by the student. The most typical codes are: WO to signal wrong word order, VOC for errors in lexis, TN to point out errors in tenses, P for punctuation and Sp for spelling errors are the most frequent ones. When errors have to do with semantics (meaning),

teachers typically underline the sentences in question and signal that type of error with a symbol that students can recognize/identify. It is also to be expected that teachers will add a comment suggesting rewriting or paraphrasing the idea that appears to be faulty in terms of logics, assertiveness or intelligibility.

There is an answer that shows that one interviewee simply signals the sentence containing one error without relaying the type of error it is to the students. This testimony comes from the same teacher who stated that he uses this technique with intermediate frequency but still he tends to provide the correction code more often.

Out of the results of the survey it can be inferred that there exists another approach to errors that has as one of its most distinctive features the display of errors on the blackboard. No students in the class are to be exposed in terms of authorship of errors. Errors are dissected and a theoretical background is presented so that students can gain more insight into the underlying reasons for those ill-formed pieces of discourse under analysis. In accordance with this methodology, some teachers have described instances that involve students being exposed to texts with embedded errors (to be reflected upon) of the same nature as the ones that are spotted in student production. There is a third strategy which entails peer correction sessions.

In the case of the fourth question, it is not entirely clear what the surveyed teacher means by “providing the correct version for the student to check his/hers against.” Now, in contrast, it appears to be a sound action to refer students to the department bibliography (which has been deemed of intermediate frequency). Last, but not least, asking students to rewrite ill-formed pieces of language does not seem to be conducive to improvement either.

Next question is Question 5 in the survey taken by the English Language I teachers. They were asked about the impact a taxonomy of frequently made errors would have on the quality of the written output of the students in English Language I. The following possible answers were provided: a) it would enable them to anticipate errors, b) it would enable them to uproot errors, c) it would get them equipped with more useful correction strategies, d) others (interviewees were asked to provide possible effects). It was made clear that teachers were allowed to select more than one right answer. Of a total number of 11 answers, 3 answers suggest that the implementation of one taxonomy would impact in terms of errors anticipation; 3 answers reveal that more useful correction strategies would stem from the possession of a taxonomy; 2 answers indicate that a taxonomy would eradicate errors. In contrast, 3 out of the 5 interviewed teachers selected the option “others” and explained that the use of a taxonomy of frequent errors in written output of the student in English Language I would lead to a smaller number of errors.

Additionally, this resource would help them choose more appropriate course materials and class activities.

<i>A</i>	Errors anticipation	3
<i>B</i>	Errors uprooting	2
<i>C</i>	Implementation of more precise correction methods	3
<i>D</i>	Others	3 Reducing number of errors Better choices in terms of course materials Better choices in terms of application activities for an ulterior overall improvement in student written production.

5.- Discussion

5.1.- Conclusions

This study was aimed to ascertain the extent to which a taxonomy helps in the analysis of mistakes made in written production by advanced students at a College of Education, and whether new –perhaps reduced taxonomies– could be of use. In view of these central queries, it can be concluded that the analysis of the written output produced by the first year students surveyed has made it possible to drastically reduce the number of categories of errors published in the taxonomies supplied by the current literature. At the same time, new classifications of errors, which appear to be more applicable and useful for first year teachers, have been identified by the actors of this exploration.

Although this study makes no pretence to any universal validity, or to any validity beyond the boundaries of the sample selected, the analysis might reinforce the notion that teachers do not seem to have the same perception in terms of what types of errors they find to be the most frequent ones. This discrepancy becomes evident as well when one analyses the surveys paying special attention to the answers obtained out of the teachers of English Language I and the teachers of the rest of the subjects of first year since the

former viewed semantics and pragmatics (cohesion and coherence) related mistakes as the ones with the biggest impact on effective communication as a whole and overall quality of the final product. In contrast, the teachers of the rest of the subjects found spelling mistakes, mistakes in punctuation and semantics-related mistakes to be most impactful.

It has also been observed that teachers tend to adopt different approaches to have their students reflect on their mistakes. These techniques may range from just signalling the sentence containing the mistake (without any mention as to what kind of mistake it was) to supplying the right rendering for the ill-formed utterance for the student to check against.

Furthermore, this research has confirmed that teachers are very fond of information that can enhance their choice of course materials to be used in their classes. Taxonomies can lead to more informed decisions in terms of resources because of their potential for anticipation of weaknesses on the part of students.

5.2.- Suggestions and reflections for future research

In view of the collected data and its review, it is to be expected that this research may serve as a point of departure for a series of further studies on

error analysis, both in terms of the written production of first year students and students sitting further language development courses along the teacher training curriculum. The findings of this research could also be used as a point of reference for future comparative studies conducted in private and state-run universities and colleges.

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Appendix

1.- Encuesta a profesores de Lengua Inglesa I

Esta encuesta, que está dirigida a profesionales que se desempeñan como docentes en la carrera del profesorado de inglés, tiene por objeto identificar cuáles son sus percepciones acerca de los errores más frecuentes en las producciones escritas de los estudiantes de primer año.

Cuando reciba esta encuesta, por favor

- 1- Guarde el documento (no responda directamente al abrir el mail).
- 2- Una vez guardado, complete las preguntas.
- 3- Guarde nuevamente, con todas sus respuestas.
- 4- Adjunte el documento con sus respuestas al mail que enviará a este Equipo de Investigación. Gracias!

1.- ¿Qué tipo de errores son los que aparecen con mayor frecuencia en las producciones escritas de los alumnos de **Lengua I**? (en la siguiente tabla, por

favor ordene los tipos de error, siendo **1** el que aparece con mayor frecuencia, y **11** el menos frecuente)

Tipo de error		¿Con qué frecuencia?
<i>A</i>	Errores de tipo sintáctico en sintagmas nominales / frases pronominales / determinantes	
<i>B</i>	Errores de ortografía	
<i>C</i>	Errores en convenciones gráficas (apóstrofes, comillas, uso de mayúscula, sangría, etc)	
<i>D</i>	Errores de tipo sintáctico en sintagmas verbales (verbos, auxiliares, verbos modales, etc)	
<i>E</i>	Errores de tipo sintáctico en sintagmas adjetivos o adverbiales	
<i>F</i>	Errores de tipo sintáctico en sintagmas preposicionales	
<i>G</i>	Errores de puntuación	
<i>H</i>	Errores en el uso de los conectores	
<i>I</i>	Errores en la formación de palabras (prefijos y sufijos en tiempos verbales, formas comparativas, sustantivos compuestos, etc)	

<i>J</i>	Errores semánticos	
<i>K</i>	Errores de tipo pragmático (organización del texto, cohesión, coherencia, etc)	
<i>L</i>	Otros tipos de error (por favor, ejemplificar / explicar brevemente)	

2.- ¿En qué medida cree usted que los errores que aparecen con mayor frecuencia en las producciones escritas de los alumnos de Lengua I pueden afectar la comunicación y la calidad de su trabajo?

[marque la opción elegida con una cruz (X)]

Tipo de error		Afectan la comunicación y la calidad de su trabajo		
		En gran medida	Parcialmente	Muy poco
<i>A</i>	Errores de puntuación			
<i>B</i>	Errores de ortografía			
<i>C</i>	Errores sintácticos			
<i>D</i>	Errores semánticos /de sentido			
<i>E</i>	Errores pragmáticos / de coherencia o cohesión discursiva			

3.- ¿Cree usted que la creación de una taxonomía de los errores que aparecen con frecuencia en las producciones escritas de los alumnos de Lengua I de la carrera del Profesorado de inglés sería útil para ayudar a los alumnos a mejorar sus producciones escritas?

[marque la opción elegida con una cruz (X)]

A	MUY ÚTIL	
B	ÚTIL	
C	ESCASAMENTE ÚTIL	

4.- ¿Qué estrategias didácticas utiliza usted en Lengua I para corregir los errores que aparecen con mayor frecuencia en las producciones escritas de los alumnos? (Enumere tres estrategias, siendo la número **1** la que utiliza con mayor frecuencia)

	Estrategias didácticas
1	

2	
3	

5.- ¿Cree usted que una taxonomía de los errores más frecuentes en las producciones escritas de los alumnos de Lengua I le permitiría... (puede marcar más de una opción)

<i>A</i>	Anticipar los errores?	
<i>B</i>	Erradicar los errores?	
<i>C</i>	Utilizar estrategias de corrección más adecuadas?	
<i>D</i>	Otro (por favor, explique brevemente)	

Muchas gracias por su valiosa colaboración.

2.- Encuesta a profesores de otras materias que se dictan en inglés

Esta encuesta, que está dirigida a profesionales que se desempeñan como docentes en la carrera de profesorado de inglés, tiene por objeto identificar cuáles son sus percepciones acerca de los errores más frecuentes en las producciones escritas de los estudiantes de primer año.

1.- ¿Qué tipo de errores son los que aparecen con mayor frecuencia en las producciones escritas de los alumnos? (en la siguiente tabla, por favor ordene los tipos de error, siendo **1** el que aparece con mayor frecuencia, y ... el menos frecuente)

	Tipo de error	¿Con qué frecuencia?
<i>A</i>	Errores de tipo sintáctico en sintagmas nominales / frases pronominales / determinantes	
<i>B</i>	Errores de ortografía	
<i>C</i>	Errores en convenciones gráficas (apóstrofes, comillas, uso de mayúscula, sangría, etc)	
<i>D</i>	Errores de tipo sintáctico en sintagmas verbales (verbos, auxiliares, verbos modales, etc)	
<i>E</i>	Errores de tipo sintáctico en sintagmas adjetivos o adverbiales	
<i>F</i>	Errores de tipo sintáctico en sintagmas preposicionales	
<i>G</i>	Errores de puntuación	
<i>H</i>	Errores en el uso de los conectores	

<i>I</i>	Errores en la formación de palabras (prefijos y sufijos en tiempos verbales, formas comparativas, sustantivos compuestos, etc)	
<i>J</i>	Errores semántico	
<i>K</i>	Errores de tipo pragmático (organización del texto, cohesión, coherencia, etc)	
<i>L</i>	Otros tipos de error (por favor, ejemplificar / explicar brevemente)	

2.- ¿En qué medida cree usted que los errores que aparecen con mayor frecuencia en las producciones escritas de los alumnos de Lengua I pueden afectar la comunicación y la calidad de su trabajo?

Tipo de error		Afectan la comunicación y la calidad de su trabajo		
		En gran medida	Parcialmente	Muy poco
<i>A</i>	Errores de puntuación			
<i>B</i>	Errores de ortografía			
<i>C</i>	Errores sintácticos			
<i>D</i>	Errores semánticos /de sentido			

<i>E</i>	Errores pragmáticos / de coherencia o cohesión discursiva			
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3.- ¿Cree usted que la creación de una taxonomía de los errores que aparecen con frecuencia en las producciones escritas de los alumnos de Lengua I de la carrera de Profesorado de Inglés sería útil para ayudar a los alumnos a mejorar sus producciones escritas?

<i>A</i>	MUY ÚTIL	
<i>B</i>	ÚTIL	
<i>C</i>	ESCASAMENTE ÚTIL	

Muchas gracias por su valiosa colaboración.