

Teacher and Learner Perceptions of Language-Learning Problem Areas

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine teacher and learner beliefs about grammar difficulties and compare them to a study of error frequency (Hasbún, 2007b). Results indicate that teachers underestimate the frequency of errors. Half of the teachers failed to identify *articles* as being one of the most common categories of errors. Moreover, first-year students believe that learning grammar implies memorizing patterns. Second-year learners feel that memorization does not guarantee accurate use of a rule. Advanced learners seem more concerned about the acquisition of vocabulary than grammar. Finally, beginners lack metalinguistic awareness to describe language difficulties; most were vague when describing problems.

Key words: teacher beliefs, student beliefs, error gravity, error frequency, error taxonomy, metalinguistic awareness

Resumen

Este estudio analiza creencias de profesores y estudiantes sobre los errores gramaticales más comunes y compara los resultados con un estudio sobre errores (Hasbún, 2007b). Se concluyó que los profesores no están concientes de la frecuencia de algunos errores. La mitad no identificó los artículos como difíciles. Además, los estudiantes de primer año creen que aprender gramática es memorizar reglas. A partir de segundo, saben que la memorización no garantiza el uso correcto. Los de cuarto se preocupan más por el vocabulario que la gramática. Finalmente, los principiantes no tienen mucha conciencia metalingüística y usan lenguaje vago para describir sus problemas.

Palabras claves: creencias del profesor, creencias del estudiante, gravedad de errores, frecuencia de errores, conciencia metalingüística, taxonomía de errores

Introduction

When English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers need to assess the language development of their students, they examine their oral and written production, searching for clues that might point toward progress. Although there are many possibilities, the most common type of evidence that teachers use, without a doubt, is the presence or absence of

grammar errors since errors give teachers essential information concerning the process of language acquisition.

In the introduction to the book *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*, editors Swan and Smith (1987: ix) explain that the goal of their work is "to help teachers to anticipate the characteristic difficulties of learners of English who speak particular mother tongues, and to understand how these difficulties arise." In one of the chapters of this same book, Coe (1987: 98-109) discusses the specific problems encountered by Spanish and Catalan speakers. What follows is a summary of the difficulties that Coe predicts Spanish speakers will face, specifically in the area of grammar.

Table 1
Characteristic Difficulties of Learners of English (E.) Who Are Native Speakers of Spanish (S.) (Coe, 1987: 98-109)

Category	Description of problem
Word order	It is freer in Spanish (S.). S. frequency adverbs appear at various points, but not at mid-sentence position. Adjectives and nouns post-modify head nouns, and DOs and IOs can go in either order. Adverbials and OCs are usually placed before a DO, and IOs require a preposition.
Questions	S. does not have a fixed word order, and auxiliaries play no part.
Tag questions	S. uses the word <i>no</i> and rising intonation to urge agreement.
Negatives	In S. auxiliaries are not used, and the negative word goes before the VP. In short answers, negative goes after the pronoun, adjective or adverb. Double negatives are grammatical in S.
Verbs	S. does not have modal auxiliaries. Other problems are related to the lexicon, such as the use of phrasal verbs and collocations.
Ellipsis	Where English (E.) uses <i>it</i> , <i>so</i> or <i>any</i> to stand for a complement that can be understood from context, S. allows complete ellipsis.
Time, tense, aspect	S. distinguishes between simple and progressive tenses and has a perfective aspect, but they do not represent similar meanings. Most subordinate clauses referring to future time have the subjunctive.
Passives	Although passives are similar, where E. uses passives without an agent, S. tends to use the <i>se</i> form.
Infinitives	S. often uses infinitives rather than gerunds as abstract nouns. The distribution of infinitive marker <i>a</i> is different from E. <i>to</i> .
Articles	S. marks generic use of abstract and plural nouns with definite article. Definite article is used with possessive pronouns. There is no distinction between indefinite article and numeral <i>one</i> , and in expressions where distinction between <i>one</i> and <i>many</i> is irrelevant, singular count nouns need no article. Indefinite article has a plural form, roughly corresponding to <i>some</i> .
Gender	Unlike E., S. has grammatical gender.

Number	S. shows number agreement with articles, adjectives and possessives. Some words that are mass nouns in E are countable in S.
Adjectives	Adjectives in S can stand by themselves. Comparatives and superlatives are expressed with equivalent of <i>more</i> and <i>most</i> , but there's one word.
Pronouns	Personal pronouns are often unnecessary in S. Most personal pronouns have same form for subject and object pronoun. S. has equivalent to impersonal pronoun <i>it</i> and dummy <i>there</i> but with different distribution. There is no equivalent for structure <i>it is + pronoun</i> as used to identify oneself. Reflexives do not correspond. S. does not normally express distinction between reflexive and reciprocal pronouns.
Possessives	S. expresses with an of-phrase possession and related concepts that in E. are expressed by possessive case nouns.
Relative pronouns	S does not distinguish between personal and non-personal relative pronouns, and relative pronouns can never be deleted.
Clauses	In S purpose clauses are expressed with a preposition and the infinitive. Distribution of non-finite forms is different. Some verbs require an IO after the verb. In E this is understood or requires different structure.
Indirect speech	Structure used to report imperatives and requests is different. S. uses subjunctive in the reported clause. Learners interpret reported questions as needing question word order.
Prepositions	S. uses preposition <i>a</i> when there is a TV and DO is human. Prepositions must go with their NPs, so EFL learners find it difficult to interpret preposition stranding. In S. a preposition can be followed by an infinitive. Central meaning of prepositions is similar in both languages, but there are exceptions.

Coe's analysis (1987: 98-109) is very helpful for EFL teachers whose students are native speakers of Spanish. Although interference from the mother tongue is obviously not the only source of difficulty since errors also need to be analyzed from a developmental perspective, this information is essential in understanding why some of these errors are so frequent and some are not corrected after pedagogic intervention, even when provided over an extended period of time. However, since there are so many variables that intervene in foreign language acquisition, a general list of possible mistakes is not enough. Teachers need to know the specific problems their learners are facing so that they can plan their lessons and courses accordingly. Teachers need to do research in the field and become familiar with the research of others to find out whether their beliefs about difficult grammar points are verified by research. That is why two studies have been conducted at the School of Modern Languages at the University of Costa Rica (Hasbún, 2007a; Hasbún, 2007b). Since the School is immersed in a process of accreditation, the present study aims at answering some of the many questions that have arisen as a result of such process.

In a study of the written production of 159 students at different levels in the School of Modern Languages at the University of Costa Rica, Hasbún

(2007b) found that, for these EFL learners, the three most frequent categories of errors across levels concerned the use of prepositions, articles and verb forms. Not surprisingly, other studies of EFL and English as a second language (ESL) students with different first languages have identified these same grammar points as troublesome. For example, Dalgish (1991) investigated the most common errors made by a group of ESL students with different L1s at a university in the United States. He found that the most frequent type was vocabulary and idiom. The rest ranked as follows: agreement, prepositions, articles, and verb forms. He compared his results to those obtained by Stenstrom who worked with Swedish learners of English. Her ranking was verb tense, article, prepositions, agreement and pronouns (p. 46). Dušková (as cited in Schmitt, 2000) analyzed the compositions of Czech learners of English and reported that the highest number of errors concerned the use of articles. Chuang (2005) found that mismanagement of the article system was the most frequent cause of grammatical error in the writing of his ESL students whose native language was Chinese. Chodorow, Tetreault & Han (2007) argue that preposition usage is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for non-native speakers to master. They ground their assertion in the analysis of research in the field. For example, they cite a study by Bitchener *et al.* who reported that 29% of all the errors made by 53 intermediate to advanced ESL students were preposition errors. Likewise, they cite a paper by Murata & Ishara who found that 18% of all the errors detected in the analysis of the written production of a Japanese learner of English were related to preposition misuse. Angwatamakul (as cited in Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007) reported that verb form, articles and prepositions were the most frequent errors of Thai learners. In summary, the findings in the above-mentioned studies suggest that prepositions, articles and verb forms are difficult for learners regardless of their mother tongue.

In conclusion, for successful language acquisition to take place, especially at the university level, it is important for teachers to be fully aware of the errors that their *own* students make the most frequently at different stages of development in order to design pedagogic interventions that would “drive forward learning processes and so help to liberate the learner from the shackles of the intermediate plateau” (Cullen, 2008: 223). Moreover, many EFL college students are eventually going to become English teachers, and their knowledge of subject matter will play an important role in shaping what they do in the classroom (Borg, 2001). Obviously, these learners need to be aware of their mistakes as well. They must be able to notice the gaps in their knowledge of the target language. Only then shall they make progress. This ability should be an important goal for language programs.

Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. In the opinion of a group of EFL teachers, what are the most frequent grammar errors their students make?

2. Which errors do teachers find unacceptable considering the students' level?
3. In the opinion of a group of EFL students, which are the most frequent grammar mistakes they make?
4. Are their opinions validated by research?

Methodology

Participants

There were two groups of participants in this study. The first one was composed of eight teachers of English as a Foreign Language, seven of which were native speakers of Spanish, and one was a native speaker of English. Seven teachers were female and the other was male. In the second group, there were 16 students randomly selected from eight classes taught by the teachers in the first group. These eight classes were also chosen at random, and they represented the eight semesters in the BA in English Program offered by the university. There were 10 female and eight male students.

To keep the data confidential, all the teachers and students will be referred to as *she* and identified with numbers as follows.

Table 2
Code Name for Participants in the Study

	LM 1001	LM 1002	LM 1235	LM 1245	LM 1352	LM 1362	LM 1472	LM 1482
Teachers	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8
Students	S1, S2	S3, S4	S5, S6	S7, S8	S9, S10	S11, S12	S13, S14	S15, S16

Procedures and Instruments

In the first part of the data collection procedure, each teacher was given a taxonomy of grammar errors and a survey to complete (see Appendixes A and B). The taxonomy was used in an attempt to make the data more easily comparable. It was hoped that the participants would use a common language to describe the errors which would make the drawing of generalizations more straightforward.

In the survey, the teachers were asked to do three things. First, they were asked to rank five types of general writing problems according to their gravity, depending on the language proficiency level they expected from the students. Second, they were asked to list the five most frequent error categories in the written production of their learners. Finally, they were invited to discuss

whether they believed if any of the errors their students were still making should have been eradicated in previous courses. The teachers took the surveys home to complete. When they were ready, the researcher collected the completed surveys and briefly talked to the teachers to make sure the instrument was clear and was interpreted the way it had been intended. Only one of the teacher had a question.

In the second part of the data collection procedure, the researcher explained the purpose and nature of the interview to the 16 students. She told them that participation was not mandatory. The interview was semi-structured since the researcher had a general idea of what type of information she wanted to obtain, but she did not have a list of predetermined questions. This data-collection technique was selected because, as Johnson (1992: 115) points out, respondents in an interview “are more likely to answer all the questions presented because of their personal involvement with the interviewer.” In addition, interviewers can obtain more meaningful information because they “can rephrase questions that are not clear to the respondent, probe for additional relevant information, and follow leads.”

The participants were asked whether they wanted to carry out the interview in Spanish or English. Only three of the first-year students chose Spanish. The rest of the interviews were held in English. Interviews were conducted in private and with the assurance of confidentiality. All of them were tape-recorded and lasted from five to 15 minutes. Later, the researcher rated the tapes. An abbreviated transcript was prepared, noting only the problems (or lack thereof) in language acquisition that the students mentioned. For those first-year participants who chose to speak in Spanish, the information was translated into English by the researcher.

The data collected in the teacher surveys as well as in the student interviews were summarized in tables and later compared to the results of the previous study (Hasbún, 2007b).

Results

The teachers

Table 3 presents how the teachers ranked five general types of errors according to their gravity, depending on the language proficiency level they expected from the students. They used one for the most and five for the least serious. It is important to point out that teachers at the School of Modern Languages have traditionally used these five areas in the grading scales and rubrics designed to evaluate writing.

Table 3
Ranking of Error Gravity According to the Level
of the Students

	Organization	Content	Mechanics	Lexicon	Grammar
T1 (1001)	2	4	5	3	1
T2 (1002)	3	4	5	2	1
T3 (1235)	3	4	5	2	1
T4 (1245)	4	5	3	1	2
T5 (1352)	3	4	5	2	1
T6 (1362)	2	1	5	4	3
T7 (1472)	2	1	5	4	3
T8 (1482)	1	2	3	5	4

Although there is no perfect agreement among the teachers in their rankings of the gravity of the five general types of errors, there is a rather clear pattern. For first- and second-year students, teachers consider that grammar and lexical errors are the most serious. Beginning in the fifth semester, there is a fundamental change. Content and organization issues become more important. Finally, all the teachers, except for T4 and T8, consider that the least serious problems are those related to mechanics. Quite likely, T8 believes that last-semester students are expected to apply the rules of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling correctly after having taken six composition courses.

Tables 4 through 11 summarize the data provided by the teachers regarding the error taxonomy. The first column includes the beliefs of teachers about what they consider to be the most common types of errors. The second column lists the grammar problems which, in the teachers' opinion, should have been overcome in previous courses and, therefore, are unacceptable. The third column presents the percentage of occurrence of the actual five most frequent errors found when the compositions written by these same students were analyzed in a previous investigation (Hasbún, 2007b).

Table 4
Beliefs About Most Frequent Errors, Errors Unacceptable for the
Level of the Students, and Actual Most Common Errors

LM-1001 Integrated English I		
Teacher 1		
Beliefs about most common errors	Beliefs about what is unacceptable	Actual errors (Hasbún, 2007)
subject verb agreement	Nothing since learners are beginners	verb form (16.58%)
subject omission		articles (13.64%)
verb form		prepositions (11.21%)
articles		s/v agreement (11.21%)
prepositions		subject omission (5.36%)

The perceptions of T1 were remarkably accurate. The five types of errors she reported as the most frequent in the output of her students were exactly the same as the ones found in the analysis of the compositions. Although the ranking of the errors is different, the categories are exactly identical. In addition, T1 claims that, in spite of the fact that most students had at least five years of English in high school, all their errors are understandable since the learners are beginners.

Table 5
Beliefs About Most Frequent Errors, Errors Unacceptable for the
Level of the Students, and Actual Most Common Errors

LM-1002 Integrated English II		
Teacher 2		
Beliefs about most common errors	Beliefs about what is unacceptable	Actual errors (Hasbún, 2007)
subject omission	subject omission	prepositions (21.72%)
verb form	agreement in simple sentences	Articles (15.71%)
subject verb agreement		verb form (8.98%)
word order		N + N (4.99%)
articles		agreement, quantifiers and modals (4.11%)

The choice of grammar difficulties by T2 matches three of the seven categories found for this group. It is necessary to explain that for this group there are seven categories rather than five since there was a three-way tie for fifth place. As to the errors she found to be unacceptable at this level, only subject verb agreement (4.11% of the actual mistakes) was among the most frequent.

Table 6
Beliefs About Most Frequent Errors, Errors Unacceptable for the Level of the Students, and Actual Most Common Errors

LM-1235 English Composition I		
Teacher 3		
Beliefs about most common errors	Beliefs about what is unacceptable	Actual errors (Hasbún, 2007)
verb tenses	subject verb agreement	prepositions (17.34%)
verb forms, agreement	verb forms	articles (15.28%)
unnecessary articles	wrong verb tenses	verb form (14.04%)
wrong prepositions	wrong word choice	pronouns (8.24%)
wrong word order		number (7.43%)

Of the six choices by T3, three (verb form, articles, prepositions) were among the five most common. With regard to unacceptable forms, only verb form (14.04%) was found among the most frequent.

Table 7
Beliefs About Most Frequent Errors, Errors Unacceptable for the Level of the Students, and Actual Most Common Errors

LM-1245 English Composition II		
Teacher 4		
Beliefs about most common errors	Beliefs about what is unacceptable	Actual errors (Hasbún, 2007)
general word order	direct translation from Spanish	prepositions (20.71%)
double subject	wrong tenses	articles (13.39%)
subject verb agreement	subject verb agreement in basic sentences	verb form (11.78%)
wrong verb tense	run-ons, fragments and comma splices	possessive nouns (7.31%)
wrong preposition		pronouns (6.49%)

Of the five errors reported by T4, only one (prepositions) was among the most common in the previous study. As to what she considered unacceptable, it is important to notice that two of the problems mentioned (translation and punctuation) were not in the typology provided and, consequently, were not considered in the previous study. The other errors did not correspond to any of the most frequent errors found for this group.

Table 8
Beliefs About Most Frequent Errors, Errors Unacceptable for the Level of the Students, and Actual Most Common Errors

LM-1352 Rhetoric I		
Teacher 5		
Beliefs about most common errors	Beliefs about what is unacceptable	Actual errors (Hasbún, 2007)
subject omission	fragments	prepositions (20.78%)
pronoun antecedent	subject omission	articles (12.01%)
subject verb agreement	pronoun agreement	verb form (5.69%)
wrong verb form	subject verb agreement	word order (5.06%)
wrong preposition	missing article	order of adverbs (5.06%)

Two of the errors mentioned by T5 are among the most frequent: prepositions and verb form. In addition, problems dealing with articles, which she found unacceptable, were among the most common (12.01%).

Table 9
Beliefs About Most Frequent Errors, Errors Unacceptable for the Level of the Students, and Actual Most Common Errors

LM-1362 English Rhetoric II		
Teacher 6		
Beliefs about most common errors	Beliefs about what is unacceptable	Actual errors (Hasbún, 2007)
pronoun antecedent	fragments, run-ons, comma splices	prepositions (16.24%)
reference unclear	problems with passive voice	verb forms (15.93%)
wrong verb form		articles (10.93%)
unclear meaning		modal auxiliaries (8.12%)
conditionals		agreement (5.93%)

Of the five problems mentioned by T6 only one (verb form 15.93%) was among the most frequent errors. She described two types of unacceptable errors: one was not dealt with in the analysis (punctuation), and the other was not among the most frequent.

Table 10
Beliefs About Most Frequent Errors, Errors Unacceptable for the Level of the Students, and Actual Most Common Errors

LM-1472 English Rhetoric III		
Teacher 7		
Beliefs about most common errors	Beliefs about what is unacceptable	Actual errors (Hasbún, 2007)
wrong verb form	subject verb agreement	articles (13.82%)
double subject	number and plural	verb forms (12.80%)
general word order	wrong verb tense	possessive nouns (11.98%)
number plural	subject omission	prepositions (10.31%)
wrong preposition	pronoun antecedent	agreement (8.67%)

Two of the problems mentioned by T7 (verb form and prepositions) were also among the most common. In regard to unacceptable errors, only one (subject-verb agreement) was one of the most frequent.

Table 11
Beliefs About Most Frequent Errors, Errors Unacceptable for the Level of the Students, and Actual Most Common Errors

LM-1482 English Rhetoric IV		
Teacher 8		
Beliefs about most common errors	Beliefs about what is unacceptable	Actual errors (Hasbún, 2007)
subject verb agreement	wrong verb form	prepositions (34.43%)
wrong preposition	subject verb agreement	articles (16.65%)
wrong verb form		verb forms (6.66%)
order of adverbs		agreement (6.66%)
missing or unnecessary article		meaning (6.66%)

T8 was quite accurate in the identification of errors. Of the five categories she mentioned, four were among the most frequent in the writing samples. Furthermore, the two errors that she pointed out as unacceptable (verb form and subject verb agreement) were among the most frequent. Table 12 presents the errors that the teachers were not able to identify among the most frequent.

Table 12
Common Errors Not Identified by the Teachers

Group	Errors correctly identified	Errors not identified
LM-1001	5	0
LM-1002	3	prepositions, N + N, quantifiers, modal auxiliaries
LM-1235	3	pronouns, number
LM-1245	1	articles, verb forms, possessive nouns, pronouns
LM-1352	2	articles, word order, order of adjectives
LM-1362	1	prepositions, articles, modal auxiliaries, agreement
LM-1472	2	articles, possessive nouns, agreement
LM-1482	4	meaning

Table 12 highlights the fact that some teachers are not aware of the pervasiveness of some of the errors. Prepositions, modals, possessive nouns, pronouns and agreement were missed by 25% of the teachers, and the category articles was not mentioned by 50%.

The students

Table 13 presents the explicit beliefs about grammar difficulties expressed by the students during the interview. Since the learners frequently wandered off the topic, some comments pertaining to other areas of language besides grammar such as vocabulary, punctuation or language acquisition in general were included herein because they were considered revealing. It is a fact that the beliefs of some people remain implicit.

Table 13
Student Beliefs About Their Problems in Grammar

S1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I write, I have difficulty using commas and words such as <i>and</i> and <i>so</i>. • Everything is very easy. I only need to memorize the verbs. • It is easy because in high school I attended the English club, and I practiced a lot. • When I write a composition, I always take the time to write 1 or 2 drafts. I have no trouble. • Vocabulary is more difficult than grammar. Too many unfamiliar words. I get the grammar rules from the teacher. She explains them in class. • English is easier than other foreign languages. I can practice English with friends. • English is not difficult. I study hard. I am an engineering major, and English is required.
S2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have no problem learning English. When I entered UCR, I didn't remember anything I had studied in high school, but now I study hard and that's it. • Many things require practice, like the verbs. Other things are more related to one's natural abilities. I have a lot of trouble understanding tapes in the lab. • I know what I want to say, but I don't know how. I don't know how or where to begin. • I see things like in Spanish. Words are organized differently. • I translate too much. • I get low grades in writing because I don't know the vocabulary. There are too many words. • I make mistakes with verbs. I don't understand connectors. I don't know how to connect my ideas and shape them. I always use the word <i>also</i>. My compositions are very dull. • Learning English takes a lot of dedication. • Pronunciation is hard. Grammar is not. I memorize. • The mistakes I make in LM-1002 are things I already studied in LM-1001. • I try to speak English, but my classmates don't help me. They make fun of me. • I have a hard time with the order of words, the vocabulary, and prepositions. • During the oral midterm, I didn't speak enough. I didn't have vocabulary. My mistakes are always the same, like when I use the word "people." • I get the lowest grades in oral exams. I get nervous. I cannot "erase" mistakes. • I feel embarrassed when I have to speak in front of the class.
S3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I memorize the verbs, but I don't know how to use them when I speak or write. • We don't have time to practice. We go too fast. • I can use what I have learned except for the tenses. The subjunctive is difficult.
S4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't like the book. I need more practice. Reported speech is very difficult. • Most of the mistakes are careless mistakes. • Prepositions are difficult. There are too many. Teachers don't give us rules.
S5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't like to write. It is difficult. • Sometimes I make mistakes with agreement. I don't pay attention. • We need feedback. Teachers sometimes don't explain problems well. They aren't consistent. • Punctuation is difficult. I make mistakes.
S6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word choice is difficult. I don't have a good dictionary or a computer. • I confuse infinitives with gerunds. I don't know when to use them. • My vocabulary is still very limited. I don't like to read. • I cannot apply the rules.
S7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The literature courses are very hard. Grammar is easy. • Sometimes verb tenses are difficult to use. • Run-on sentences. • Sometimes I make mistakes in agreement. • I don't know how to organize my ideas. • Word choice. Words look alike.
S8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a teacher now, but I don't know how to teach prepositions. They are really similar. We translate prepositions. I look for examples on the Internet. • I make mistakes in punctuation. I have never understood what a comma splice is. • When I write fast, I confuse <i>this</i> with <i>these</i>. • Sometimes I omit the subject. I think in Spanish and what comes to mind is the verb. • I write fast so I make beginner mistakes. • I mix sentences. I forget what I started talking about. • I have noticed that 2 classmates say "people is." Even a professor said that once. • Word choice is more difficult than grammar.

The information in Table 13 allows for some generalizations regarding learner beliefs. First of all, in general terms, while some students consider that learning grammar, especially some of the rules, is a matter of memorization, others express their frustration at their inability to put those rules into practice when speaking and writing. This type of inability, which has been aptly called *the inert knowledge problem*, was explained by Alfred North Whitehead in 1929 (as cited in Larsen-Freeman 2003: 8)

Knowledge gained in (formal lessons in) the classroom remains inactive or inert when put into service (in communication within and) outside the classroom. Students can recall the grammar rules when they are asked to do so but will not use them spontaneously in communication, even when they are relevant. Besides the frustration that this engenders in students and teachers, I would imagine that it contributes to a great deal of attrition from language study. Students become discouraged when they cannot do anything useful with what they are learning.

This is the exact same frustration that students, especially those in second year, manifested during the interview. They argue that they study and memorize the rules that the professor or the textbook has explained, but when it comes to using them in speaking or writing either in the grammar course or in others, they do not know when or how those rules apply. In other words, they know the form and probably the meaning, but the function is still beyond their reach.

Second, with the use of a semi-structured interview, it was not possible to collect enough specific information about what students considered difficult in the area of grammar. The students frequently digressed and, for the most part, were able to pinpoint just a few areas of continuing difficulty. Under these circumstances, the researcher decided not to pursue the matter further in order not to bias the results of the study. After reading the abbreviated transcript of the interviews, at least two explanations emerged: either the learners cannot explain the difficulties that they encounter in learning English, or they are not fully aware of them. For example, some of their answers seem to indicate that they are not prepared to verbalize their language problems. Many of them do not seem to have enough metalinguistic awareness, or conscious knowledge of the formal aspects of English grammar, in order to describe what is difficult. The following is an example:

- Researcher: Tell me about the most difficult aspects of grammar.
- S5: I think we need feedback. Teachers sometimes don't explain well. Some teachers say something, and another teacher doesn't agree.
- Researcher: I see. Ok. Give me an example of something that is difficult.
- S5: I don't know! Many things!

The descriptions that they provided were vague. In fact, there are very few references to concrete grammar problems such as the ones described in the typology that the teachers used. For example, first-year students mentioned *verbs* twice and *word order* and *prepositions* once. Second-year students mentioned

verb tenses twice and *the subjunctive mood*, *reported speech* and *prepositions* once. Third-year students mentioned *subject verb agreement* and the difference between *infinitives* and *gerunds* once. Finally, fourth-year students referred to *verb tenses*, *subject-verb agreement*, *prepositions*, *demonstratives* and *subject omission* once. Furthermore, many of their remarks refer to vocabulary and punctuation rather than grammar points. An additional point to consider is the fact that perhaps many of these learners are not aware of their limitations. This explanation is less plausible since these are classroom learners who receive negative evidence on a regular basis.

Third, although this is not a study in personality and affective factors that shape language acquisition, after analyzing the comments made by the learners, it can be concluded that most students seem to be satisfied with their attributes and abilities as language learners. That is, they experience a high degree of self-efficacy in that area. Mercer (2008: 182) defines self-efficacy as “cognitive in nature and . . . concerned with expectancy beliefs about one’s perceived capability to perform a certain task in a very specific domain, for example, to carry out a particular type of reading or writing activity.” In other words, self-efficacy is an assessment of one’s competence to perform a specific task in specific situations. This high degree of self-efficacy is significant since research has shown that “the amount and kind of positive or negative feedback that learners receive... from both their teacher and their peers will affect ... the establishment of their self-efficacy in that area” (Williams & Burden, 1997: 98). Therefore, for these learners, there seems to be a positive type of classroom interaction that facilitates language acquisition. In addition, their behavior hints at a healthy, flexible language ego for which the second language does not pose a substantial threat or inhibition (Brown, 2000).

Conclusions

There are five important findings in this study. To begin with, first- and second-year teachers consider that the most serious mistakes in their students’ compositions are grammatical and lexical in nature. In contrast, third and fourth-year teachers believe that the worst offenders are the organization and the quality of the content of the writing piece. This is logical since, in the early stages of acquisition, more grammatical and lexical problems are expected. After some time, learners write more accurately and fluently, allowing teachers to concentrate their efforts on the students’ ideas and their organization. Second, some of the teachers are not fully aware of the frequency of occurrence of specific grammar problems in the students’ writing. This is reflected by the fact that some of them under or overestimated the presence of certain errors. In this respect, the most significant finding was the failure of half of the teachers to identify the use of articles as one of the most common errors. Third, first-year students believe that learning grammar is a matter of memorizing patterns. However, second-year students acknowledge the fact that the memorization of a rule does not guarantee its accurate use in real life. Fourth, advanced

learners, especially those in fourth year, seem to be more concerned about the acquisition of vocabulary, and consequently, put the acquisition of grammar into the background. Fifth, beginners seem to lack metalinguistic awareness. It is not easy for them to talk about their language difficulties, and most of the learners in the sample were vague when describing problems.

In summary, both teachers and students must be aware of the grammar mistakes that learners at different levels of acquisition are prone to make. Teachers need to do something about those grammar features that their learners have demonstrably failed to master. In order to address these issues of linguistic accuracy systematically, they ought to develop a plan that includes enough time for the teaching and recycling of these difficult grammar points. As Ferris (2005: 107) correctly points out, "With few exceptions, it is unlikely that [learners] will be able to achieve the high levels of accuracy demanded and expected without teacher intervention and training." To this end, teachers should promote what Larsen-Freeman (2003) calls *grammaring*. In her opinion, "Grammaring is the ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. [This] requires a shift in the way grammar is traditionally viewed. It requires acknowledging that grammar can be productively regarded as a fifth skill, not only as an area of knowledge" (143). In summary, the teaching of grammar should not be equated with giving students grammatical rules; the teaching of grammar must integrate grammar lessons into communicative tasks that allow learners to acquire the skill of *using* grammar accurately, meaningfully and appropriately.

Not only teachers but also students need to acknowledge the fact that some language items are typically acquired late. Learners need to reflect on and articulate what it is that they are having trouble with, why they are having difficulty, and what they can do to overcome those problems. If the students are aware of their limitations, they are more likely to pay attention to the form of the language, so they will benefit from what has been called *noticing*. Schmidt (1994:179) has pointed out that "the target language forms will not be acquired unless they are noticed and that one important way that instruction works is by increasing the salience of the target language forms in input so that they are more likely to be noticed by learners." In other words, when learners notice a grammar item in the input, in subsequent encounters with that item, the students will be more likely to process and understand language with ease.

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Appendix A

Taxonomy of Grammar Errors

General category	Sub-categories	Examples of errors
Nouns	number or irregular plural	several <i>kind</i> / a key data
	mass / countable nouns	newer equipments
	subject omission	In private universities is faster
	double subject	It appears to be inevitable the signing of this treaty
	possessive noun	indicate that <i>Costa Rican's</i> lack freedom of speech
	Noun + Noun	juice of orange / he is driver of a truck
Pronouns	pronoun / antecedent	person . . . <i>they</i>
	reference unclear	body modifications help to express who <i>they</i> are
	wrong pronoun	<i>theirs</i> objective is
Articles	missing article	my life as (Ø)adult
	unnecessary article	the fountain of <i>the</i> youth
	wrong article	<i>an</i> special place
Demonstratives		<i>that</i> things
Quantifiers		<i>another</i> persons
Possessives		<i>people</i> . . . in <i>your</i> food
Verbs	subject verb agreement	most people <i>is</i> bored with
	wrong verb form	have forgotten <i>of bringing</i>
	wrong verb tense	I <i>was working</i> there for a year
	modal auxiliary	I <i>will</i> like to thank you
	verb missing	they see their lives still the same (are)
	direct object missing	People like to spend their free time purchasing. You should ask some questions (yourself)
Adjectives and adverbs	wrong part of speech	a <i>good paid</i> job
	plural adjectives	they call their teachers <i>obsoletes</i>
	comparative and superlative forms	the mortality rate would be <i>smallest</i>
Prepositions	missing preposition	to operate the patients
	wrong preposition	when they arrived <i>to</i> the place
	unnecessary preposition	they must attend <i>to</i> seminars to change
Subordination		and find someone is required a worker (someone who requires a worker)
Expletives		(Monteverde) There is a wonderful place (it is)
Word order	general word order	More healthy is to do exercise has an idea of how beautiful is nature
	order of adjectives	contact color lenses
	order of adverbs	People could do there a lot of activities
Negative forms		Do diets no is bad. Your body haven't the same requirements.
Unclear meaning		In conclusion, this problems don't make that a very good lifestyle in my neighborhood change.
Conditional forms		If all people had money to afford an organ transplant, they <i>will</i> also find space and organs.

Appendix B

Teacher Survey

Dear _____,

I would like to thank you for helping me collect the students' writing samples last semester. Your support has been invaluable to me. During the past few months, I have been reading the compositions and trying to classify the students' errors. I want to find out which types of errors tend to disappear early on and whether there are errors that tend to remain or become fossilized in spite of pedagogic intervention. For the second part of my project, once again, I need your help. I am including the following short survey, and I would deeply appreciate your input.

1. Which errors seem to be the most **serious** at this level? Rank them from 1 to 5, where 1 is the most serious.
 - errors concerning organization (i.e., thesis statement, conclusion or transition, etc.) _____
 - errors concerning content (i.e., whether the issue was addressed or whether irrelevant material was included, etc.) _____
 - errors concerning mechanics (i.e., punctuation, capitalization, spelling, etc.) _____
 - lexical errors (i.e. those that are the product of poor or incorrect word choice, etc.) _____
 - grammar errors (i.e. verb tenses, agreement, use of articles, etc.) _____
2. In your opinion, which are the five most **frequent** types of errors that students make at this level? Please refer to the table on the following page for error types. Use the error types under "sub-categories."

Frequency	Error type
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

3. Do your students (or some of them) still make grammar mistakes that you find **unacceptable**, that is, mistakes that in your opinion should have been eradicated before they took your course?
 - Yes _____ No _____
 - If your answer is yes, please list the unacceptable errors. For this question, it is not necessary to use the typology provided.
 - _____
 - _____

- _____
- _____
- _____
- Are these mistakes frequent?
- Yes _____ No _____
- Why do you think these students still make those mistakes?
