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## Error Frequencies Among ESL Writers: A Resource Guide

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Error Frequencies Among ESL Writers:

A Resource Guide

Maria Teresa Company

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Error Frequencies Among ESL Writers: A Resource Guide

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Master of Arts

Being a competent writer is an important skill in academic education. However, second language (L2) writers often struggle to be linguistically and lexically competent. This project explored the most frequent linguistic writing errors made by 343 English as a second language (ESL) students when Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) was applied as an instructional methodology. These errors were also classified by language groups based on the students' first language (L1). These students were enrolled in an intensive English program at the English Language Center (ELC), Brigham Young University. The first languages of these students were Spanish, Korean, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. The students' writing samples were collected to compile the most frequent linguistic error types. The results of this project show that the most frequent linguistic errors for ESL students are spelling, word choice, determiner, preposition, singular/plural, and word form. Among these errors, spelling and word choice were the most common errors for all ESL students no matter their L1. The principal aim of this project was to take the data collected in the error analysis and create a booklet to be used as a reference guide to frequent ESL linguistic writing errors. With this booklet, teachers should be more aware of frequent errors to better assist their students since this could help them anticipate some of the linguistic difficulties that L2 learners may encounter. This booklet could also help L2 learners attain writing linguistic competence.

Keywords: L2 writing, linguistic writing errors, L2 learners, L1 interference.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Being a competent writer is an important skill for educational purposes (Tan, 2007) and “one of the most salient outcomes of higher education” (Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause, & Anderson, 2010, p. 84). Acquiring writing competence is an arduous task because writing is a multifaceted process that “involves cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis” (Tan, 2007, p. 113). This process could be even harder for second language (L2) learners who struggle to be linguistically accurate in writing. ESL/EFL teachers are also concerned about writing accuracy because they may struggle trying to help L2 writers since the gap between L2 writing research and L2 writing teaching practice leaves them with a dilemma about what methods and practice to use in the classroom to better serve their students (Ferris, 1999, 2010; Gu nette, 2007; Russell & Spada, 2006). Indeed, this gap necessitates more studies on L2 writing as well as better instructional methodology in the effort of helping L2 learners attaining linguistic competence in their writing.

Writing well is not an ability that is acquired naturally. The acquisition of writing skills takes time and practice. Writing is also a multifaceted and complex process that involves different aspects such as fluency, complexity, and accuracy. Moreover, “academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas” (Myles, 2002, p. 1). This composing and development of ideas may be a difficult task for L2 writers who are trying to develop language proficiency as well as writing skills. In other words, L2 learners are learning English and learning to write at the same time (Hyland, 2003; Myles, 2002). Thus, writing can be a very difficult task to accomplish for L2 writers.

Additionally, the revised Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers notes that L2 learners “may have difficulty adapting to or adopting North American discursive strategies because the nature and functions of discourse, audience, and rhetorical appeals often differ across



cultural, national, linguistic, and educational contexts” (2009, para. 2). Indeed, the knowledge, experience, and needs of L2 learners are very different from the knowledge, experience, and needs of native speakers. L2 writers have special needs that can be shown in the relevant differences found between native language (L1) writing and L2 writing "with regard to both composing processes (and subprocesses: planning, transcribing, and reviewing) and features of written texts (fluency, accuracy, quality, and structure)” (Silva, 1993, p. 657).

In an endeavor to help L2 writers be more linguistically and lexically competent, written corrective feedback (WCF) or error correction has been widely used as an instructive tool. However, error correction in L2 writing has become a serious concern to L2 writing teachers and the topic of an ongoing debate among researchers because of the inconsistent results in studies on error feedback and its role in writing classes (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Cohen & Robbins, 1976; Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010a; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007).

In an effort to provide better writing correction feedback to L2 learners, since research has not given a conclusive approach to error correction yet, an instructional methodology was developed: Dynamic WCF (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010b; Hartshorn, et al., 2010). This method recognizes that feedback should focus on the learners’ specific needs based on the errors that they make. It provides feedback on what the L2 writers need most and ensures that “writing tasks and feedback are meaningful, timely, constant, and manageable for both student and teacher” (Hartshorn et al., 2010, p. 87). As an instructional approach, Dynamic WCF has enabled the improvement of linguistic accuracy in writing (Evans, et al., 2010b; Evans, Hartshorn, & Strong-Krause, 2011; Hartshorn et al., 2010; Lee, 2009).

Although Dynamic WCF has proven to help student writing accuracy, it would be helpful for L2 instructors to have an idea of common L2 writing errors. Identifying the most frequently recurring linguistic errors of L2 writers may offer important pedagogical advantages such as clearer and more achievable writing instruction. Because instruction is more focused on the areas of need, L2 writers can improve their writing accuracy (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009, 2010). Thus, if L2 writing instructors could have access to a resource that would provide them with a better perspective on and approach to L2 writing linguistic errors, their teaching could be more effective.

### **Project Aims**

Based on the assumption that raising teacher awareness of linguistic errors will be helpful, this project has two aims:

1. To compile and provide a selected list of the most frequent linguistic writing errors of ESL learners as indicated by their teachers and based on the learners' L1s: Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Russian.
2. To create a booklet with the list of the most frequent linguistic L2 writing errors for novice or in-training L2 writing teachers who have little or no experience teaching writing to non-native English speaking students. This booklet will be a reference guide for teachers and tutors who need help anticipating L2 linguistic difficulties in the writing of learners who speak the particular mother tongues referred to above. Other more experienced teachers may also find this booklet relevant to their goals and efforts towards effective instruction and assessment.

While this project focuses on selected linguistic errors made by intermediate and advanced ESL writers applying Dynamic WCF at the English Language Center (ELC), Brigham Young University, its findings can not only provide a guideline for Linguistic

Accuracy teachers at the ELC but also to novice L2 writing teachers in other academic institutions and settings.

### **Project questions**

1. What are the most frequent linguistic errors in writing made by intermediate and advanced ESL learners?
2. How does the intermediate and advanced ESL learners' L1 affect their accuracy in writing in terms of frequent linguistic writing errors?

Along with these main project questions, the following supplemental questions were addressed:

3. What is the most frequent writing error family made by intermediate and advanced ESL learners in general?
4. Based on the learners' L1, what is the most frequent writing error family made by intermediate and advanced ESL learners?

### **Definitions**

This section explains and clarifies some of the central terms used in this project.

**Written Corrective Feedback:** Lightbown and Spada (1999) define corrective feedback as “any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect. This includes various responses that the learners receive” (p. 171-172). Along with this definition, Russell and Spada (2006) describe corrective feedback as “any feedback provided to a learner, from any source that contains evidence of learner error of language form” (p. 134).

**Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback:** An instructional method that requires interaction between the teacher and the students in order to help students improve their written linguistic accuracy. This instructional approach “draws on principles of L2

acquisition to facilitate improved written linguistic accuracy” (Evans, et al., 2011, p. 232). A more detailed description will be given in Chapter 2.

Errors: “Morphological, syntactic and lexical deviations from the grammatical rules of a language that violate the intuitions of native speakers” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 264). In other words, “A linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers’ native speaker counterpart” (Lennon, 1991, p. 182).

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will examine various relevant points of literature. It will begin with a brief explanation of sources of error. Following this, a discussion about some research on L1 influence in L2 writing will be addressed as evidence of L1 interference since this project provides a list of the most common ESL errors based on the L1. Then, the debate on error correction will be introduced to better understand the concern of L2 writing and error feedback. This will be followed by a description of Dynamic WCF as the tool used to gather the data of this project. Finally, some implications of L2 writing pedagogy will be discussed.

### Sources of error

L2 writing teachers know well that L2 learners will make errors as they write in English. While these errors may come from a variety of causes, there are two main sources commonly attributed to L2 writing errors: interlingual transfer or errors made due to interference from the mother tongue; and intralingual transfer or errors made due to the learning process of the target language.

“Interference from the mother tongue” refers to when L2 writers use their L1 in some way while writing in the L2, which results in language transfer errors. If the organization of the two languages is noticeably different, L2 writers may make errors with certain frequency because of interference of the L1 on the L2. In other words, because the two languages’ structures are dissimilar, L2 learners may apply rules from their L1 causing errors in the production of the target language. This could explain why an ESL/EFL Japanese student may have a problem with articles. The Japanese language does not have articles, which may cause an error in a Japanese student writing in the L2. He/she may omit articles or use them mistakenly. Although the L1 may help to make positive inferences in the target language, the differences as well as the similarities between the L1 and the target language can be a cause of an error (Beardsmore, 1982; Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957; Swan & Smith, 2001).

Whereas research has already attributed some of the L2 learners' errors to L1 interference, interference from the mother tongue is not the only cause of errors. Some errors mirror the learners' competence at a particular stage and reflect the characteristics of second language acquisition (SLA) (Carson, 2001; Corder, 1973, 1981; Ellis, 1997; Richards, 1970). Errors such as *I can to speak Portuguese* or *he coming from Portugal* illustrate more developmental learning errors than language transfer errors. Another example of this could be the use of the past tense suffix *-ed* for all verbs. This error can be common in L2 learners regardless of their L1. These intralingual errors are the result of learning and using the L2 rather than language transfer.

These two attributed sources of errors are not mutually exclusive. The complexity of learning and the different learning strategies that L2 learners may rely on could lead to errors based on the L1 or L2 (Myles, 2002). The upshot of all of this is that it may be relevant to know the sources of errors to be able to correct them, since pointing out errors can help learners to self-correct (Krashen & Pond, 1975; Raimes & Sofer, 2002).

### **Research on L1 interference**

While not all learners' writing problems are attributable to L1 interference, "it is clear that a writer's first language plays a complex and important role in SLA" (Carson, 2001, p. 195). Learners of English is likely to show traces of their mother tongue in their L2 writing (Carson, 2001; Koppel, Schler, & Zigdon, 2005; Swan & Smith, 2001; Miles, 2002; Van Weijen, Van den Bergh, Rijlaarsdam, & Sanders, 2009). Indeed, when an error is made because L1 transfer occurs, it is usually the most confusing to readers and the most problematic for writing teachers (Raimes & Sofer, 2002). For instance, native speakers of Spanish often use subjectless sentences because in Spanish the pronoun *it* can be omitted. Native speakers of Russian may write *when you came here?* or *I no like them* because the Russian language has no equivalent for the auxiliaries *do*, *have*, *will*, and *be* (Swan & Smith,

2001). These examples together with others show that there is interference in the L2 learning because of the learners' mother tongue.

Transfer from the learners' L1 "is an important cognitive factor in the interpretation of writing errors and has been acknowledged from both a syntactic and a rhetorical perspective" (Carson, 2001, p. 195). Some L2 learners' problems with phonology, vocabulary and grammar in L2 are because of their L1 (Beardsmore, 1982; Swan & Smith, 2001), and some errors and certain writing patterns might be predominant for native speakers of a given language (Koppel, Scheler, & Zigdon, 2005). The following studies provide some research of L1 influence on L2 writing.

Alonso (1997) carried out a study in which it was observed that errors in adverbs and adjectives in English were made by native speakers of Spanish because of the different meaning and use of those adverbs and adjectives in Spanish. As an illustration, because the adjective and adverb *solo* in Spanish corresponds to the English *only*, and *alone*, Spanish speaking L2 learners may mistakenly use these adverbs and adjectives in English: *He was only in his house*, meaning *He was alone in his house*. Alonso found that structures in the students' L1 characterized the main source of interference in the L2.

Bhela (1999) also carried out a study to show the extent to which L2 writers use their L1 structures to produce a response. Despite the fact that the learners in this study used L1 structures with L2 structures to produce correct responses in L2, they also produced L2 structures using L1 structures that were inappropriate due to interference of L1 on their L2. The learners produced errors with "articles, adverbs, past tense, plurals, contractions, and incomplete sentences" (p. 29). These L2 errors were able to be traced back to the learners' L1.

Along the same lines, Darus and Hei Ching (2009) studied the most common errors that native speakers of Chinese make in an attempt to highlight these errors and make the

students aware of the different structure of English, Malay, and their L1. Darus and Hei Ching found that the most common errors made by the Chinese students were “mechanics of writing, tenses, prepositions, and subject-verb agreement” (p. 251). These areas were the most difficult for the students because of the interference of their L1 and the misinterpretation of some grammatical rules of English.

Stapa and Izahar (2010) also studied the subject-verb agreement errors of twenty post-graduate students in Malaysia. They found that these students, even when they were majoring in English and at the level of postgraduate studies, still encountered problems with subject verb agreement because they were transferring their L1 grammar to the L2.

This research strongly suggests that L1 plays a significant role in the production of L2 errors, and that L2 learners tend to rely on their L1 while writing in the L2. Hence, “studies indicate that in certain situations and under certain conditions, the influence of the L1 can be clearly demonstrated” (Powell, 1998).

### **Debate on error correction**

Writing errors have always been a concern for L2 writing instructors and researchers. The most common response to learners’ errors to help them improve their writing accuracy has been error correction. However, for decades, there has been an attitude toward error correction, which has sparked a debate among SLA and L2 writing scholars on error correction and its role in writing classes (e.g., Ferris, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2010; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007). This ongoing debate on whether and how to provide L2 learners feedback on their written linguistic errors has raised opinions that range from correction of all errors to no correction at all because it is assumed to be harmful and ineffective (Bitchener, et al., 2005; Chandler, 2003; Cook, 1991; Corder, 1981; Evans, et al., 2010a; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Higgs & Clifford, 1982; Krashen, 1984; Lalande, 1982; Selinker, 1992; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007).



The strongest position against error correction has been taken by Truscott (e.g., 1996, 1999, 2007) who has fervently claimed that “grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned” (1996, p. 328) because of its negative effects such as taking time away from other more vital writing problems. Opposed to Truscott’s claim, other researchers have taken the position that research on the subject of error feedback is not conclusive yet and that more research on this matter is needed (Bitchener, et al., 2005; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1999, 2004). However, notwithstanding the need for further research on the usefulness and efficacy of error correction, Truscott has reiterated his point on error correction saying that “we can be 95% confident that if it actually has any benefits, they are very small” (2007, p. 270).

To give a different perspective on this debate, Guénette (2007) compared various studies on WCF concluding that the causes of the different results on error correction are due to the fact that the research design and methodology are dissimilar or flawed. She insists that “we need designs that address different issues and control as many variables as possible,” and that “we also need descriptive studies that will take the whole context into account, in and out of the classroom” (p. 51).

This disagreement will continue between proponents of both opinions until research is able to prove either error correction helps in development of language fluency and accuracy, or error correction is ineffective. Actually, this controversy on error correction in L2 writing has posed questions to be answered and brought the need of more comparable designs and replicated studies on the issue of error correction and feedback (Bitchener, et al., 2005; Ferris, 2004; Guénette , 2007).

In the meantime, improving error correction methods could facilitate learning and more effective L2 writing pedagogy. It is in this environment of whether or not to correct written grammatical errors that certain researchers have suggested that an important question

would be “how” to provide error correction (Evans, et al., 2010b; Evans, et al., 2011; Hartshorn, et al., 2010). It may not be the case that error correction does not work, but rather that error correction has not been done correctly (Evans, et al., 2010b).

### **Dynamic WCF**

In an attempt to improve L2 learners’ writing accuracy despite all the uncertainty about WCF, an error correction method called Dynamic WCF was designed. It was created to help ESL learners improve their writing linguistic accuracy at BYU’s intensive English programs in Hawaii and Provo over the course of more than 15 years.

Dynamic WCF is an instructional method that requires interaction between the teacher and the students. It consists of writing a 10-minute paragraph at the beginning of almost every class period. Then, the teacher provides indirect, coded feedback on the students’ paragraphs. Those paragraphs are then returned to the students who have to edit their paragraph according to the teacher’s feedback. This process of the teacher giving feedback and the students editing their paragraphs continues until the paragraph is error-free.

Dynamic WCF has two main purposes. The first purpose is to ensure that “writing tasks and feedback are meaningful, timely, constant, and manageable for both student and teacher” (Hartshorn, et al., 2010, p. 87). The second purpose is to guarantee that “feedback reflects what the individual learner needs most as demonstrated by what the learner produces” (Evans, et al., 2010b, p. 8).

Dynamic WCF accomplishes these two purposes because of its instructional characteristics. First, it provides meaningful feedback by giving a reason for the feedback to students, by not going beyond students’ linguistic ability, and by engaging students in self-correction. Second, it provides timely feedback by minimizing the time gap between students’ writing and the teacher’s feedback. Third, it provides constant feedback, which will be more effective than sporadic feedback (Ferris, 2004). Fourth, it provides manageable

feedback by having students write a ten-minute paragraph. Ten minutes “is long enough to capture a representative sample of student writing while still enough to keep the tasks and feedback manageable” (Evans, et al., 2010b, p. 10). Finally, it provides feedback that mirrors students’ individual needs “based on factors such as first language, language aptitude, and the reasons for learning a second language” (Evans, et al., 2010b, p. 8).

This error-correction method has been applied in various contexts with positive results in learners’ linguistic accuracy (Evans, et al., 2010b; Evans, et al., 2011; Hartshorn, et al., 2010; Lee, 2009). This supports the assumption that learners can improve their linguistic accuracy if an appropriate error correction is applied (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2002).

### **Implications for L2 writing pedagogy**

The issues surrounding error correction have affected teachers and researchers differently. Researchers may see them as an opportunity to keep looking for answers to their questions. On the other hand, teachers who are looking for “short or long term results (the end of the semester or the end of the year) feel left out on a limb” (Gu nette, 2007, p. 41). Indeed, Ferris (1999) acknowledges an important point regarding this issue:

Real-life teachers, however, have always known that students’ errors are troublesome, that students themselves are very concerned about accuracy, and that responding effectively to students’ grammatical and lexical grammar problems is a challenging endeavor fraught with uncertainty about its long-term effectiveness. (p. 1)

There are some “real-life teachers” who still do not know how to help their students write more effectively and accurately (Evans, et al., 2010b; Ferris, 2010); there are still some L2 writing instructors, especially novice L2 writing teachers, who may not know how to interpret or apply the results of L2 writing research. While they are confused about what to do because of the gap between research and practice regarding L2 writing, they still see linguistic errors in their students’ writing and have few ideas of how to help.

Some instructors may or may not be familiar with L2 language and writing problems when assessing their learners' writing. Indeed, L2 instructors need to have a clear understanding of the nature of L2 writing and L2 writers' needs (Ferris, 2010). As an ideal, an L2 writing teacher should have training on both L2 writing and writing pedagogy (CCCC, 2009; Ferris, 2009; Matsuda, 1999). However, this may not be the case in many L2 writing courses. Some programs may still have instructors who have been trained in teaching writing but not in teaching multilingual writers. They may also have instructors who are novice or inexperienced in teaching L2 writing. These novice and untrained teachers may find themselves unable to help their students because of their lack of training and knowledge of L2 writing errors.

Regardless of teachers' training and knowledge on L2 writing, teachers have seen that it is usually difficult to improve writing without providing any kind of feedback on errors (Bitchener, et al., 2005; Evans, et al., 2010b; Evans, et al., 2011; Ferris, 2006; Myles, 2002; Sheen, 2007). Additionally, Evans, Hartshorn, and Tuioti (2010a) distributed an online survey to L2 writing teachers to answer two questions: "a) To what extent do current L2 writing teachers provide WCF? And b) What determine whether or not practitioners choose to provide WCF?" (p. 53). They reported that a vast majority (95%) of L2 writing teachers who were surveyed provide WCF for several reasons specifically because it helps students and because students expect it and need it.

Additionally, L2 writers are also concerned about writing accuracy. They have high writing expectations and a great desire to improve their linguistic accuracy (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). They want to write "close to error-free texts" and be more accurate and proficient writers (Myles, 2002, p. 1). However, even highly advanced and trained L2 writers still "exhibit numerous problems and shortfalls" (Hinkel, 2004, p. 4) because they may

encounter many difficulties producing more linguistically accurate writing (Ferris, 2009; Silva, 1993).

It seems that whatever approach teachers take to L2 writing, there is still a need to reduce the struggles that L2 writers face. As Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, and Takashima (2008) have suggested, “more studies looking at different grammatical features” (p. 368) are necessary to be able to identify more effective ways to help L2 learners write more accurately. Given that it is acknowledged that L2 writing contains errors, it is also clear that there is a need for developing strategies and materials to help L2 learners improve their writing skills and accuracy. For instance, knowing the most common linguistic writing errors may be an important instrument in language teaching since it could provide a new perspective and redirect teachers’ methodology. Teachers would be able to make better decisions to fit more of their learners’ needs and their needs as teachers. This knowledge could support the purpose of language learning as well, making students aware of their errors. Hence, the knowledge of L2 learners’ errors can lead teachers to create appropriate materials and devise effective teaching techniques (Erdogan, 2005).

The study of written linguistic errors would be significant to teachers and learners, not only to understand errors per se, but to improve writing accuracy competence. Hence, it is a logical step to compile a list of the most frequent linguistic errors made by ESL learners in an effort to help teachers provide meaningful and specific error feedback and to help learners to develop strategies of self-correction. The following chapter will explain the methodology used to compile these writing linguistic errors.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology applied to answer the project's questions. The first section will describe the participants and instructional context. The second section will discuss the error categories and procedures used to carry out this project including the steps that were followed to analyze the data collected and to compile them into a useful teacher reference.

### **Participants and instructional context**

The participants of this project were enrolled in an intensive English program at the ELC. This center has two programs: The Foundations Program, which focuses on basic language skills, and the Academic Program, which prepares students to develop academic language skills (listening and speaking, reading, writing, and linguistic accuracy). Each program also offers three proficiency levels of English.

This project involves 343 ESL students at the ELC, ages 17 to 45. From these 343 participants, 169 were native speakers of Spanish, 58 were Korean, 51 were native speakers of Portuguese, 25 were native speakers of Chinese, 22 spoke Japanese, and 18 were native speakers of Russian. Their English proficiency levels ranged from intermediate to advanced. The data were collected from nine semesters between the Winter 2007 to Winter 2012 semesters.

These students were enrolled in the Academic Program in the three levels offered. One of the classes required for these students was a Linguistic Accuracy class, where the students reviewed grammar concepts to improve their grammatical and lexical accuracy. They recognized and corrected recurring errors in their writing response to basic academic prompts. The core element of the instructional methodology in this class was Dynamic WCF. One of their assignments in this class was to write 10-minute paragraphs on a daily or near daily basis. Then, feedback was provided to the students. Since the aim was to engage the

students at a cognitive level, most of the feedback provided by the teachers was indirect in the form of coded symbols. The students then had to record the error types on an error tally sheet (see Appendix A).

### Procedures and error categories

The error tally sheets from each student were collected to carry out this project. Even though these tally sheets included twenty different kinds of writing errors, this project only considered determiner, subject-verb agreement, verb form, run-on sentence, incomplete sentence, verb tense, preposition, spelling, word form, word choice, singular/plural, countable/uncountable, word order, capitalization, and punctuation errors. The errors categorized as *the meaning is not clear* (?), *awkward wording* (AWK), *omit, something is missing* (^), and *new paragraph* (¶) were excluded from the error analysis since these errors could encompass several things. Table 1 shows the error types and their codes used in the tally sheets and in this study. To better understand the error types in this project, an example of them used in context with the corresponding error symbols can be found in Appendix B.

Table 1.

#### *Error Categories and Codes Used in Teacher Marking and in Analysis*

Error Type	Code
Determiner	D
Subject-verb agreement	SV
Verb form	VF
Run-on sentence	SS ro
Incomplete sentence	SS inc
Verb tense	VT
Preposition	PP
Spelling	SPG
Word form	WF
Word choice	WC
Singular/Plural	S/PL
Count/Noncount	C/NC
Word order	WO
Capitalization	C
Punctuation	P

Because not all students wrote the same number of paragraphs, an average of errors per paragraph for each student was needed. Each type of error made by each student was tallied to get the total number of the different errors that the students made. Then, the total number of each error type was divided by the number of paragraphs written by each student to get an average of each error type made by each student. Once the average per error type was determined, the students and their averaged errors were classified by their L1 in an attempt to identify a relationship between the students' L1 and their most frequent errors made.

Following this classification, another average of each error type was calculated by adding the total number of errors in each error type made by the students who spoke the same L1, and dividing the total of each error type by the number of students in each language category since there was not the same number of students in each L1 category. This average provided the mean or average number of errors for the error types made by speakers of the same L1.

The errors were not only classified by error types, but they were also organized as error families (Hartshorn & Evans, 2012, in progress): *lexical* (preposition, word form, and word choice), *grammatical* (determiner, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, verb form, singular/plural, count/noncount, run-on sentence, incomplete sentence, and word order), and *mechanical* (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization). These error families were taken into consideration to better identify general patterns in the students' writing.

While examining the data, it was helpful to obtain some appropriate and relevant descriptive statistics. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference on each error type as well as what error types were significantly more difficult among language groups.



These data together with the results of the statistical analyses were gathered to create a booklet as a reference guide for L2 writing teachers. This booklet includes valuable information about ESL/EFL learners' needs and struggles in writing. It also provides supplemental information about the different error types since they are statistically compared by language groups. Some worthwhile language worksheets showing samples of L1 transfer in L2 writing can also be found in this booklet.

The booklet was piloted by tutors in the ESL Writing Lab at Brigham Young University. This piloting was useful in several ways. First, tutors provided suggestions for improving the content of the booklet such as including more information about the concept of "language distance" since they found it very beneficial. Second, they also gave advice to enhance layout such as including bullet-point summaries for quick reference in a tutor section. In addition, they found the booklet to be generally quite useful for ESL writing tutors. One tutor noted, "The learners' needs section would be very beneficial to a new tutor." The results of this project and an introduction to this booklet are presented in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, the chapter presents the results of this project based on the project questions by showing the average of each error type made by the students. Second, it provides descriptive statistics using a one-way ANOVA to better explain any statistical significance in the results as well as any statistical difference among the error types within language groups. This statistical analysis also shows the most frequent error types made by the students based on their L1. Finally, it introduces the booklet created.

### **The most frequent linguistic errors made by ESL writers**

Before presenting the most frequent linguistic errors in writing, it is worth noting that the total number of errors for each category of linguistic error may not indicate how difficult that linguistic error was for the students. It simply indicates the frequency with which linguistic errors occur in the paragraphs that the students wrote. For instance, spelling errors are more frequent than word choice errors, but spelling may be less difficult than word choice for L2 writers.

To answer the first project question, the total number, percentage, and mean value of errors made by the students were considered. The following table shows the total number of errors for each category of linguistic errors as well as its percentage and mean value. Error numbers and percentages were rounded and sorted in descending order of frequency. The results of the mean values show that the five most common errors are spelling (1.80), word choice (1.65), determiner (1.08), preposition (0.97), and singular/plural (0.95).

Table 2

*Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Category*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=343
SPG	616	16.6	1.80
WC	566	15.26	1.65
D	371	10	1.08
PP	332	8.95	0.97
S/PL	326	8.79	0.95
WF	320	8.63	0.93
P	273	7.36	0.80
SV	211	5.69	0.62
VF	209	5.63	0.61
VT	145	3.91	0.42
C	128	3.45	0.37
SS ro	75	2.02	0.22
WO	71	1.91	0.21
SS inc	39	1.05	0.11
C/NC	28	0.75	0.08
Total	3710	100	

**The most frequent linguistic errors based on learners' L1**

To answer the second project question, the results will be displayed by language groups based on a one-way ANOVA to indicate any significant difference that may occur among error types within language groups. The following tables show the result of this statistical analysis.

The tables show different subsets of errors that are statistically different from one another though the errors within a subset are not. The abbreviation *sig* stands for *significance*. The subset for alpha is set at 0.05. Any value less than this will result in a significant difference. The errors within a subset are not significantly different from each other. Those error types that do not appear in any of the other subsets of errors and with any other error types are significantly different from the other error types. In addition, there are some errors that appear in multiple subsets. This means that there is no statistical difference among these specific error types. For example, determiners, singular/plural, subject-verb agreement, verb

form, verb tense, run-on sentences, and capitalization (Table 5) might be equally challenging for native speakers of Portuguese since these errors are not statistically different, even though they appear in different subsets of errors. Finally, error types are displayed from the less frequent to the most frequent error.

Table 3

*Linguistic Writing Errors Statistics - L2 Spanish Speakers*

Spanish	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
C/NC	169	.0509							
SS inc	169	.1241	.1241						
WO	169	.1764	.1764	.1764					
SS ro	169	.2740	.2740	.2740					
VT	169		.3910	.3910	.3910				
C	169			.4182	.4182				
D	169				.6244	.6244			
SV	169				.6384	.6384			
VF	169				.6473	.6473			
S/PL	169					.7576	.7576		
WF	169					.8953	.8953		
P	169						.9537		
PP	169						.9598		
WC	169							1.4533	
SPG	169								1.8080
Sig.		.304	.082	.183	.117	.071	.478	1.000	1.000

As Table 3 shows, the most frequent errors for native speakers of Spanish are spelling (Subset 8), word choice (Subset 7), and preposition, punctuation, word form, and singular/plural (Subsets 6). Spelling and word choice (Subsets 7 and 8) are significantly different from the other error types and the most frequent since they do not appear in any of the other subsets and with any other error types.

Table 4

*Linguistic Writing Errors Statistics - L2 Korean Speakers*

Korean	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05				
		1	2	3	4	5
SS ro	58	.0576				
SS inc	58	.1033	.1033			
C/NC	58	.1109	.1109			
WO	58	.3079	.3079	.3079		
C	58	.3629	.3629	.3629		
VT	58	.4647	.4647	.4647		
P	58	.4793	.4793	.4793		
VF	58	.4936	.4936	.4936		
SV	58	.5248	.5248	.5248		
WF	58		.9366	.9366	.9366	
PP	58			1.0555	1.0555	
SPG	58			1.0745	1.0745	
S/PL	58				1.5138	1.5138
WC	58					2.1162
D	58					2.1214
Sig.		.891	.081	.163	.632	.544

Table 4 shows that the most frequent errors for Korean speaking learners are determiner, word choice, singular/plural, spelling, preposition, and word form. Determiners and word choice (Subset 5) are significantly different from the other error types and the most frequent since they do not appear in any of the other subsets and with any other error types. However, there is no statistical difference between them since they are included in the same subset.

Table 5

*Linguistic Writing Errors Statistics - L2 Portuguese Speakers*

Portuguese	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05			
		1	2	3	4
SS inc	51	.0906			
C/NC	51	.1167			
WO	51	.2559	.2559		
C	51	.3447	.3447	.3447	
SS ro	51	.3594	.3594	.3594	
VT	51	.4143	.4143	.4143	
VF	51	.6320	.6320	.6320	
SV	51	.7484	.7484	.7484	
S/PL	51	.8259	.8259	.8259	
D	51	.8882	.8882	.8882	
P	51		.9833	.9833	
WF	51		1.0337	1.0337	
PP	51			1.0943	
WC	51				1.9525
SPG	51				2.3190
Sig.		.076	.096	.131	.976

Table 5 shows that the most frequent errors for native speakers of Portuguese are spelling, word choice, preposition, word form, and punctuation. Although spelling and word choice are the most frequent errors, there is no significant difference between them since they appear in the same subset. However, they appear to be more problematic or statistically different compared with the other error types.

Table 6

*Linguistic Writing Errors Statistics - L2 Chinese Speakers*

Chinese	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05			
		1	2	3	4
SS inc	25	.1152			
SS ro	25	.1168			
WO	25	.1264	.1264		
C/NC	25	.1360	.1360		
C	25	.2824	.2824	.2824	
P	25	.4724	.4724	.4724	
VT	25	.6068	.6068	.6068	.6068
SV	25	.6540	.6540	.6540	.6540
VF	25	.8160	.8160	.8160	.8160
PP	25	.9048	.9048	.9048	.9048
D	25	1.1948	1.1948	1.1948	1.1948
WF	25		1.2136	1.2136	1.2136
S/PL	25			1.2928	1.2928
SPG	25				1.5784
WC	25				1.6380
Sig.		.054	.051	.102	.085

For native speakers of Chinese, the five most common errors are word choice, spelling, singular/plural, word form, and determiner. However, these errors together with preposition, verb form, subject-verb agreement, and verb tense errors are not different statistically since they are grouped in the same subset and despite the fact that most of them appear in different subsets of errors.

Table 7

*Linguistic Writing Errors Statistics - L2 Japanese Speakers*

Japanese	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05		
		1	2	3
SS ro	22	.0900		
SS inc	22	.1055		
C/NC	22	.1700		
WO	22	.2391	.2391	
C	22	.2482	.2482	
VF	22	.4055	.4055	
VT	22	.4714	.4714	
SV	22	.4800	.4800	
P	22	.5627	.5627	
PP	22	.8014	.8014	.8014
WF	22	.8723	.8723	.8723
S/PL	22	1.1327	1.1327	1.1327
WC	22	1.5518	1.5518	1.5518
D	22		1.8155	1.8155
SPG	22			2.3436
Sig.		.131	.067	.083

For Japanese speaking learners, the most common errors are spelling, determiner, word choice, singular/plural, word form, and preposition. Although spelling is the most frequent error, these errors are not statistically different.



Table 8

*Linguistic Writing Errors Statistics - L2 Russian Speakers*

Russian	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05			
		1	2	3	4
C/NC	18	.0250			
SS ro	18	.1189			
WO	18	.1256			
SS inc	18	.1256			
C	18	.3178			
VT	18	.3189			
SV	18	.4117			
VF	18	.4989	.4989		
P	18	.5472	.5472		
S/PL	18	.5728	.5728		
WF	18	.6739	.6739		
PP	18	.6772	.6772		
WC	18		1.2539	1.2539	
D	18			1.5139	1.5139
SPG	18				2.1783
Sig.		.211	.065	.998	.186

Table 8 shows that the most common errors for native speakers of Russian are spelling, determiner, and word choice. However, spelling is significantly different from the other error types since it does not appear in any of the other subsets and with any other error types.

### The most frequent writing error family made by ESL writers

To answer the third project question, the percentages of the most frequent error families and mean values are presented in Table 9. The table displays the percentages of error families based on the total number of errors per error family as well as the percentage of each error family per student (mean). Error numbers and percentages were rounded. The results of the mean values show that the most frequent error family is grammatical (4.30), followed by lexical (3.55), and then mechanical (2.97).

Table 9

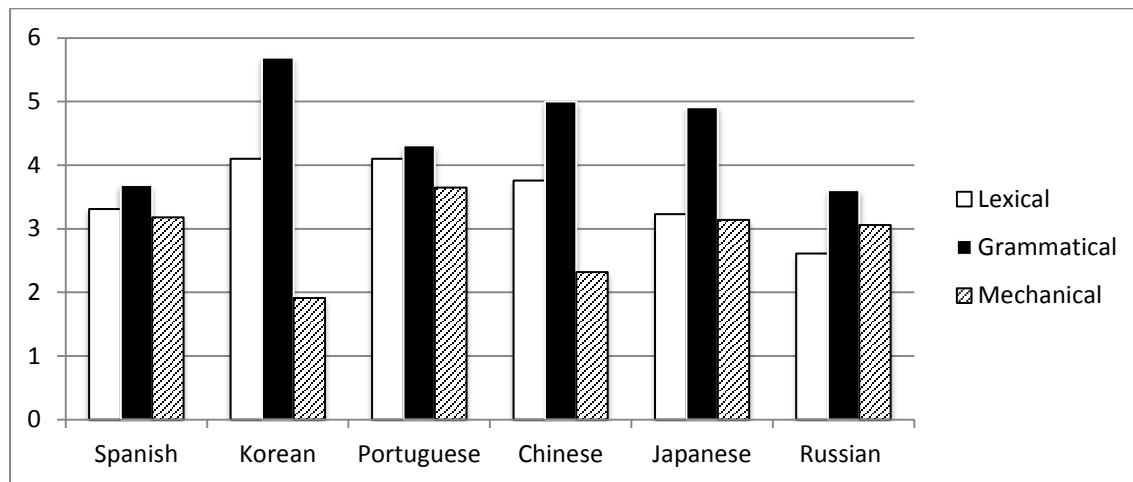
#### *Error Families per Paragraph and Percentage*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=343
Grammatical	1475	39.76	4.30
Lexical	1218	32.83	3.55
Mechanical	1017	27.41	2.97
Total	3710	100	

### The most frequent writing error family based on learners' L1

To answer the fourth project question, the results of the mean values for each language group will be considered. The following figure shows that the most frequent error family for native speakers of Spanish, Korean, Portuguese, Chinese, and Japanese is grammatical, followed by lexical, and then mechanical. For Russian speaking learners grammatical is also the most frequent error family; however, this error family is followed by mechanical and then lexical.

Figure 1

*Error Families by Language Groups***Booklet**

The booklet was created as a practical reference guide for L2 writing teachers, especially for those teachers who are novice or have little experience teaching L2 writers. It will help L2 writing teachers anticipate some of the linguistic difficulties of ESL/EFL writers and overview for them briefly and simply some L1 features that may interfere in L2 writing. It could also be very helpful for ESL/EFL learners who want to improve their linguistic accuracy in their writing. The booklet presents the results of this project on the most frequent linguistic errors made by ESL writers as well as the most frequent linguistic errors made by these writers based on their L1.

This booklet helps understand L2 writing concerns by introducing the most ESL/EFL frequent linguistic writing errors as well as L2 writers' struggles and L1 interference. It provides a general description of the L1s of the participants in this project, which includes samples of transfer errors in English. It also shows some comparisons of the linguistic errors by language groups. Finally, it poses a few questions to reflect on as well as some suggestions on how to introduce the two most frequent linguistic writing errors in the classroom. For a full version of this booklet, please see Appendix C.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the results described in Chapter 4. It will also discuss some limitations to this project and address some pedagogical implications and suggestions for further projects or studies.

### Discussion

The first aim of this project was to compile the most frequent linguistic writing errors of L2 learners as identified by their teachers on writing samples and based on the learners' L1s. This compilation has shown that the five most frequent errors are spelling, word choice, determiner, preposition and singular/plural. Among these five, spelling and word choice seem to be the most common and frequent errors for all L2 learners no matter their L1s. This corroborates the results of a study on L2 spelling errors, which suggested that spelling pedagogy should not be different from one L1 group to another L1 group because spelling needs to be improved by all L2 learners (Tsedell, 1984). Indeed, L2 learners need certain language-processing skills to be able to spell accurately as well as other additional skills (Shemesh & Waller, 2000). This compilation also supports a study on L2 learners' vocabulary use in writing, which observed that understanding a word does not "predict productive use of the word" in writing (Lee, 2003, p. 551). The observation in this study seems to acknowledge the need for explicit teaching instruction to help L2 learners learn and use new vocabulary in writing.

The result of this compilation also shows that some errors are more frequent or common for some language groups of learners. For instance, determiners seem to be more difficult for native speakers of Asian languages or Russian than for native speakers of Spanish or Portuguese. This could be because Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Russian languages do not have articles, making the choice and use of determiners for these learners more difficult.

The second aim of this project was to create a booklet using the information obtained in the compilation of the most frequent linguistic L2 writing errors. This booklet was created with the goal to reduce the struggles of some novice or in-training L2 writing teachers while providing feedback to their L2 learners. However, the booklet can also be useful for other more experienced L2 writing teachers. For instance, it contains a section that focuses on possible L1 interference errors that teachers or learners can refer to as a guide. It can also be used for classroom instruction or for individual writing conferences and tutoring.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this project that must be considered. Some limitations relate to the nature and number of the participants. Other limitations are related to the teachers involved in the project and the recording process of the errors on the tally sheets. Finally, there are some limitations to the booklet itself.

The language groups were not equal in size. If we considered that L1 has an influence in L2 writing, this could have varied the results on the most frequent errors since the majority of students were native speakers of Spanish. However, the comparisons of linguistic errors, which can be found in the booklet (pages 34-44), showed that most of the linguistic error types were not statistically different among language groups. This suggests that L1 likely did not affect the results of the project to any degree.

Second, some students could have had lower proficiency in writing than intermediate or advanced. The students at the ELC take a placement test in order to determine their level of English proficiency. This placement test is centered on the four language skills: writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Based on the results on this test, the students are placed in the appropriate level trying to balance their proficiency level in the four language skills. Consequently, some students could have been good at writing and others may have been less proficient writers. Yet, they may have been placed in the same level because of their

proficiency level in the other language skills. These less proficient writers could have made more errors in their pieces of writing, which samples were used to compile the data of this project.

There may have been some inconsistencies among the teachers. Since the data collected come from several years and semesters, different teachers were involved in the project. Some teachers may have classified their students' errors differently or from a different perspective. Some teachers may have underlined certain students' errors under conditions of uncertainty or mislabeled an error while identifying the error type made by their students. Furthermore, some teachers, regardless of their experience, may have also seen some errors as more significant than others. For instance, one of the teachers rarely labeled the punctuation errors in his students' writing because he did not "consider it important enough to attend to." These different points of view in classifying errors could have affected the results of this project. However, having different teachers could have also compensated or balanced the natural limitation of rating. Some teachers mark every error; some teachers mark errors they think are serious; others mark personal preferences. Thus, having different teachers could have been helpful in adjusting the different points of view on the identification of errors.

The methods of recording errors on the tally sheets could have been also a limitation. Since the errors were recorded by the students, some errors could have not been properly marked down on the tally sheets. However, these tally sheets were also checked by the teachers in writing conferences with their students, so it is unlikely that this significantly altered the data.

Finally, due to the time limitations placed of this project, the booklet could not be fully evaluated. It was piloted briefly by some tutors, but it was not piloted by teachers in their classrooms. This was beyond the scope of this project. While it was not fully piloted in

multiple contexts, there were very positive comments from the tutors who did use it about the practicality of the booklet in a tutoring session. For instance, some tutors mentioned how helpful for a quick reference or guide the language worksheets were.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Despite the limitations of this project, one of the principal pedagogical purposes of this booklet is to help teachers address linguistic errors in L2 writing. Every error may not deserve equal attention. As Lane and Lange (1999) observe, “some grammatical errors are much more serious than others and can seriously affect the reader’s ability to understand a piece of writing” (p. xi). For instance, a punctuation error may not be as important as a verb tense error since a punctuation error may not interfere with the meaning of a message, but a verb tense error may affect comprehensibility. Similarly, spelling errors, even though they may create a negative impression, may be seen as less serious or important errors since they do not prevent readers from understanding a piece of writing whereas verb form errors could make the writing less readable and coherent (Sheorey, 1986; Wee, Sim, & Jusoff, 2010). However, as Lane and Lange point out, some errors that are considered as less serious can become much more serious if they occur very often in a piece of writing. This suggests that teachers may have to decide how serious or important an error is in a piece of writing (Lane & Lange, 1999).

Teachers’ drawing their students’ attention to recurring errors could be beneficial. If errors that learners make more frequently should have priority when correcting errors (Hendrickson, 1978), teachers should be aware of these errors to be able to help their students. Thus, considering the errors that learners produce frequently could help establish priorities for correcting errors. It could also help develop instructional materials.

Since spelling and word choice were the most frequent linguistic errors for all ESL learners, some writing activities focused on vocabulary could be introduced in the classroom

as part of the writing process as well as spelling activities to help learners improve their spelling skills. Some writing activities that focus on vocabulary and spelling could help learners think of specific words to use and how to write those words correctly. Moreover, vocabulary knowledge would also help with grammar. The reason to believe this is “that knowing the words in a text or conversation permits learners to understand the meaning of the discourse, which in turn allows the grammatical patterning to become more transparent” (Schmitt, 2000, p. 143).

After considering these suggestions about vocabulary and spelling activities in the classroom, it could also be very helpful to consider and reflect on the data provided in the booklet. The booklet can help teachers understand learners’ errors and give the opportunity to help learners understand and recognize their own errors as well. It could provide a better idea of where learners are starting, and it would help teachers give specified instruction and provide strategies to correct errors.

### **Suggestions for further projects**

This project is just the beginning of many potential projects and/or studies on L2 writing. For instance, using the information here, other projects could be carried out to create teaching materials based on the most frequent L2 linguistic writing errors identified in this research. Furthermore, it is quite possible that these findings could be of assistance to future research and/or studies on L1 interference.

This project could also be valuable for those studies on the use of error tally sheets in L2 writing. Research on how error tally sheets can raise learner awareness of errors or improve writing performance could be beneficial. Having this project as a reference, future studies could examine whether or not these tally sheets help L2 learners improve their writing skills and linguistic accuracy.



Another important suggestion for future research is the evaluation of the effectiveness and usefulness of the booklet. This could be accomplished by piloting the booklet in various contexts. It would be beneficial to ask some teachers to use this booklet as a guide in their teaching. In so doing, the booklet could be evaluated and more data could be obtained regarding the value of the booklet from the perspective of teachers and learners.

Finally, adding more language sheets to the booklet would be very useful. The six languages presented in the booklet are a start, but many other common languages could be included to expand the usefulness of this reference. In addition, more features and differences between L1 and L2 to the sheets that are currently included would be advantageous.

### **Conclusion**

This project has shown that the most frequent linguistic errors in writing for L2 learners are spelling, word choice, determiner, preposition, singular/plural, and word form. Among these errors, spelling and word choice are the most common errors for all L2 learners no matter their L1. In teaching writing, teachers should be aware of these frequent errors to better assist their students. It has also corroborated that the learners' L1 has an influence in L2 writing, since some errors were more frequent or common for some language groups of learners. Finally, it has assisted in the effort of reducing the gap between L2 writing research and L2 writing teaching practice, providing a booklet for L2 writing teachers, especially novice or inexperienced ones in teaching L2 writing. This booklet is meant to help teachers anticipate some of the linguistic difficulties that L2 learners may encounter and thereby help learners improve their linguistic competence in L2 writing.

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### Appendix A: Error Tally Sheet

	Choosing a college	Leisure time	Giving advice	Honesty							Total
D	3	4	1	1							9
SV	1	2	1	2							6
VF			3								3
SS ro	2		1								3
SS inc		1									1
VT	1										1
PP	2	1	1	1							5
SPG	4	5	2	7							18
WF	3	2	1	3							9
WC	3	4	3	2							12
S/PL	2	2	1	1							6
C/NC											
?	3		2								5
AWK											
W O											
C	7	1		2							10
P	1		1								2
omit	2	1	1	2							6
^	2	4	3	2							11
¶											
<b>Score</b>	4.0	4.1	4.2	4.4							

### Appendix B: Error Symbols Used in Context:

Error Samples	Correction
<i>D</i> 1. The climber slowly ascended to top.	<i>A determiner is needed before top.</i>
<i>SV</i> 2. She think he will win the race.	<i>She thinks he will win the race.</i>
<i>VF</i> 3. Eat pizza at parties is fun for us.	<i>Eating pizza at parties is fun for us.</i>
<i>SSro</i> 4. He bought pizza she came by they ate it.	<i>These independent clauses need to be separated or combined properly.</i>
<i>SSinc</i> 5. Because inflation had risen so sharply.	<i>An independent clause is required.</i>
<i>VT</i> 6. Yesterday she drive to Provo.	<i>Yesterday she drove to Provo.</i>
<i>PP</i> 7. He was always studying in 7:00 AM.	<i>He was always studying at 7:00 AM</i>
<i>SPG</i> 8. She was exceptional at mathomatics.	<i>She was exceptional at mathematics.</i>
<i>WF</i> 9. He truly was a very diligence student.	<i>He truly was a very diligent student.</i>
<i>WC</i> 10. She typed the paper on her calculator.	<i>She typed the paper on her computer.</i>
<i>S/PL</i> 11. He bought five apple with the money.	<i>He bought five apple with the money.</i>
<i>C/NC</i> 12. She breathed in the fresh airs.	<i>She breathed in the fresh air.</i>
? 13. The desk walked to the eat door.	<i>(requires clarification)</i>
<i>AWK</i> 14. My family has 1 brother and 1 sister.	<i>I have one brother and one sister.</i>
<i>WO</i> 15. She ran three times the marathon.	<i>She ran the marathon three times.</i>
<i>C C C</i> 16. then, mr. white came home.	<i>Then, Mr. White came home</i>
<i>P P</i> 17. She said I am so happy.	<i>She said, "I am so happy."</i>
<i>OMIT</i> 18. I will very study very hard.	<i>I will study very hard.</i>
^ 19. After class did all my homework.	<i>After class I did all my homework.</i>

**Appendix C: On the Write Truck (Full-Text)**

# On the Write Truck

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A Reference Guide to

Frequent ESL/EFL Linguistic Writing Errors

**By Maria T. Company**

# On the Write Track

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A Reference Guide to  
Frequent ESL/EFL Linguistic Writing Errors

By Maria T. Company



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# INTRODUCTION

This booklet is a reference guide for ESL/EFL writing teachers. It is meant to help anticipate some of the linguistic difficulties that learners who speak particular mother tongues may encounter. Therefore, if you are a novice at teaching ESL/EFL writing or have little or no experience teaching multicultural/ESL/EFL writers, this booklet is written just for you. It will introduce you to some particular ESL/EFL linguistic writing problems.

This booklet is divided into five sections: Introduction, Written Linguistic Errors, Language Differences, Error Comparisons, and Reflection. The introduction will help you understand ESL/EFL writers' struggles and the influence of the students' mother tongue (L1) in their writing. The written linguistic errors section will show you the most frequent linguistic writing errors made by ESL/EFL writers. The data of this section come from 343 ESL students' writing. These students were enrolled in an intensive English program. The language differences section will provide a general description of some languages: Spanish, Korean, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. These languages were selected because they represented the L1s of the students studied. The description of these languages is focused on some areas of likely interference of students' L1 while

writing in English: determiners/articles, verbs and tenses, prepositions, spelling, and word order. The problems described in these areas were common to these students. This section will also provide a list of the most frequent linguistic written errors based on the students' L1s. The error comparisons section will contrast the frequency of each error's linguistic category by L1s. Finally, the reflection section will pose a few questions to reflect on as well as some pedagogical implications based on the two most frequent linguistic errors: spelling and word choice.

“This is how you do it: you sit down at the keyboard and you put one word after another until it's done. It's that easy, and that hard.”

Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman

# Is English a Difficult Language?

---

English may seem like a difficult language with challenges, such as its troublesome spelling system, its complex irregular verbs, and its rigid word ordering rules. On the other hand, English may seem to be an easy language because you do not worry too much about gender agreement or declensions. The truth is that to answer the question, it is more complicated than it seems. Whether a language is considered difficult or not depends sometimes on the learner's L1 and his/her perception of what is easy or difficult.

As an illustration, articles in English may seem easier to Spanish speakers because the English article system is more similar to their own than to Japanese speakers, who do not have articles in their language. This “language distance,” the extent to which a language differs from another, could be an indicator of how difficult English is for a student. Crystal states, “If the L2 is structurally similar to the L1, it is claimed, learning should be easier than in cases where the L2 is very different” (as cited in Chiswick & Miller, 2004, p. 4). Thus, some languages may be more or less difficult to learn depending on how different or similar they are to the learners' L1 (Chiswick & Miller, 2004).



Now, going back to our question: Is English a difficult language?  
Perhaps, we should say that if it is difficult to our learners, then it may  
be.

**In what other language do people drive in a  
parkway and park in a driveway?**

Lederer, 1998, p. 3

# ESL/EFL Learners' Needs

---

Writing is a multifaceted and complex process that involves different aspects such as fluency, complexity, and accuracy. The acquisition of writing skills takes time and practice. Indeed, “academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas” (Myles, 2002, p. 1). This composing and developing of ideas may be difficult tasks for our students who are trying to develop language proficiency as well as writing skills. In other words, ESL/EFL learners are learning English and learning to write at the same time (Hyland, 2003; Myles, 2002). This could be why ESL/EFL writers encounter many difficulties producing linguistically accurate writing (Ferris, 2009; Silva, 1993).



We should not compare the knowledge, experience, and needs of ESL/EFL learners with the knowledge, experience, and needs of native speakers. The revised Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers highlights this point stating that ESL learners “may have difficulty adapting to or adopting North American discursive strategies because the nature and functions of discourse, audience, and rhetorical appeals often differ across cultural, national, linguistic,

and educational contexts” (2009, para. 2). Indeed, comparing ESL/EFL students with native speakers, ESL/EFL writers make “more morphosyntactic errors, more lexicosemantic errors, and more errors with verbs, prepositions, articles, and nouns” (Silva, 1993, p. 663). This could be the reason that we, as teachers, may feel frustrated sometimes because our students’ writing has an accent and unexpected errors. Thus, it helps to keep in mind that ESL/EFL writers are striving to be more syntactically and lexically competent, and that this could take considerable time (Cummins, 1991; Haynes, 2005).

**Part of being a good language teacher is to empathize with your students and understand their language needs.**

**Folse, 2004, p. 127**

# Mother Tongue & Errors

---

It is a given that our students will make errors as they write in English. While these errors may happen for a variety of reasons, one of

Writing Errors and  
First Language  
Interference

the main sources of errors is interlingual transfer or errors made due to interference from the mother tongue (Beardsmore, 1982; Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957; Swan & Smith, 2001).

Despite the fact that not all of our students' writing problems are attributable to L1 interference, the mother tongue can affect our students in many ways. Students of English are likely to show traces of their mother tongue in their writing (Swan & Smith, 2001). Some studies have already indicated that "in certain situations and under certain conditions, the influence of the L1 can be clearly demonstrated" (Powell, 1998). Indeed, when a mother tongue transfer error occurs, it is usually the most confusing to readers and the most problematic for writing teachers (Raimes & Sofer, 2002). For example, native speakers of Spanish often use subjectless sentences because in Spanish the pronoun *it* can be omitted, which leads to writing mistakes such as *Is a wonderful day*. Thus, some ESL/EFL students' problems with grammar in their writing are due to their mother tongue (Beardsmore, 1982; Swan & Smith, 2001).

# Dealing with Errors

---

When it comes to the topic of dealing with errors, most of us may think about error correction. The problem is that research on error correction and its usefulness and practicability is still uncertain because of the inconsistent results in studies on error feedback (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Chandler, 2003; Cohen & Robbins, 1976; Evans, Hartshorn, & Tuioti, 2010; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007).



The issue on error correction has affected teachers differently than researchers. While researchers may see this as an opportunity to keep looking for answers to their questions, teachers who are looking for “short or long term results (the end of the semester or the end of the year) feel left out on a limb” (Guénette, 2007, p. 41). Actually, teachers have seen that it is usually difficult to improve writing without providing any kind of feedback on errors (Evans, Hartshorn, & Strong-Krause, 2011; Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010a; Myles, 2002). Then, what should we do? Should we, as teachers, still use error correction as an attempt to help our students acquire accuracy in their writing?

Perhaps, in the meantime, we will have to decide which errors to address. We might want to deal with recurring errors because every error may not occur with equal frequency. Errors that learners make more frequently should have priority when correcting errors (Hendrickson, 1978; Raimes & Sofer, 2002).

Indeed, being aware of frequent errors would enable us to help our students more effectively. It would help us to have a better understanding of the linguistic areas our students have the most difficulty with while writing, and to determine the teaching methods and materials that would best fit the learning and teaching. Hence, we should focus more on the most frequent errors and try to overcome them by choosing the appropriate materials and methods.

The more we can point out to our students why they are making certain errors, the more they will be able to avoid them.

Raimes, 1983, p. 151.

# WRITTEN LINGUISTIC ERRORS

If you are one of those teachers who does not know how to help students write more accurately, the information provided in this section is intended to help you write your next lesson plan.

The data presented in the figures and tables come from the writing of 343 ESL students, ages 17 to 45, enrolled at the English Language Center, Brigham Young University. Their English proficiency level ranges from intermediate to advanced, and their mother tongues include Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Russian. The data were taken from nine semesters between the Winter 2007 to Winter 2012 semesters.

One of the required classes for these students was a Linguistic Accuracy class where the students wrote 10-minute paragraphs on a daily or near daily basis. Then, indirect feedback was provided to the students in the form of coded symbols. The students then had to record the error types on an error tally sheet. These error tally sheets were collected to obtain the most frequent linguistic written errors. The following tables and figures are the result of this compilation.



# Most Frequent Errors

Table 1. *Error Categories and Codes Used*

Error Type	Code
Determiner	D
Subject-verb agreement	SV
Verb form	VF
Run-on sentence	SS ro
Incomplete sentence	SS inc
Verb tense	VT
Preposition	PP
Spelling	SPG
Word form	WF
Word choice	WC
Singular/Plural	S/PL
Count/Non count	C/NC
Word order	WO
Capitalization	C
Punctuation	P

The following figures and tables show the percentages of the most frequent errors and their mean values. The figures show the mean values in descending order of frequency, and the tables show the percentages of error types based on the total number of errors as well as the percentage of each error type per student (mean).

Figure 1. *Most Frequent ESL Linguistic Writing Errors*

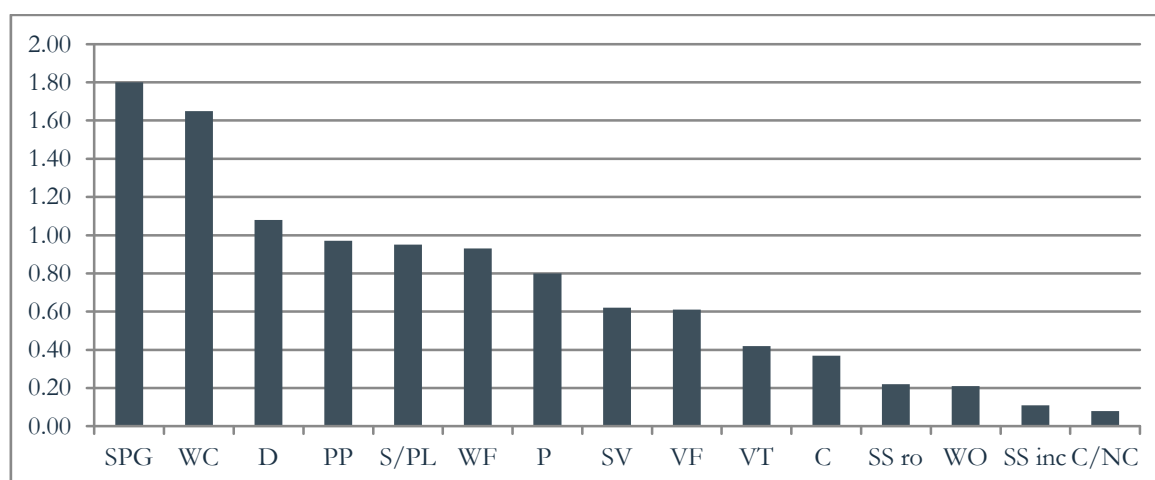




Table 2. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Category*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=343
SPG	616	16.6	1.80
WC	566	15.26	1.65
D	371	10	1.08
PP	332	8.95	0.97
S/PL	326	8.79	0.95
WF	320	8.63	0.93
P	273	7.36	0.80
SV	211	5.69	0.62
VF	209	5.63	0.61
VT	145	3.91	0.42
C	128	3.45	0.37
SS ro	75	2.02	0.22
WO	71	1.91	0.21
SS inc	39	1.05	0.11
C/NC	28	0.75	0.08
Total	3710	100	

Note: Some error numbers and percentages were rounded.

Table 2 shows the total number of errors for each category of linguistic errors as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the five most frequent errors are spelling (1.80), word choice (1.65), determiner (1.08), preposition (0.97), and singular/plural (0.95).

It is worth noting that the total number of errors for each category of linguistic error may not indicate how difficult that linguistic error was for the students. Rather, it could just mean that the particular linguistic error occurs a fewer number of times in the paragraphs that the students wrote compared to the other linguistic errors.

To better identify general patterns in students' writing, these errors can also be classified by error families: 1) *Lexical* → Preposition, word form, and word choice; 2) *Grammatical* → Determiner, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, verb form, singular/plural, countable /uncountable, run-on sentence, incomplete sentence, and word order; and 3) *Mechanical* → Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

The following table and figure show the most frequent error families.

Figure 2. *Most Frequent Writing Error Families*

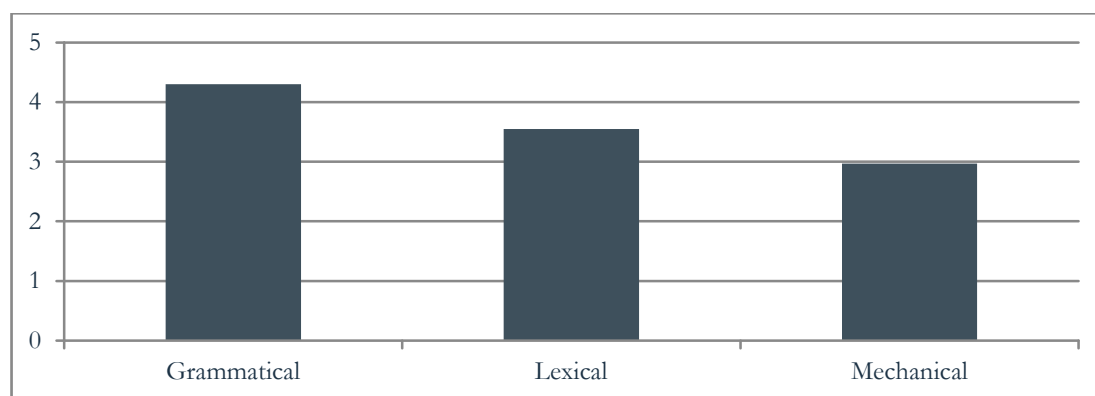


Table 3. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Error Family*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=343
Grammatical	1475	39.76	4.30
Lexical	1218	32.83	3.55
Mechanical	1017	27.41	2.97
Total	3710	100	

Table 3 shows the total number of errors for each error family as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the most frequent error family is grammatical (4.30), followed by lexical (3.55), and then mechanical (2.97).

# LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

This section contains the descriptions of some of the differences between English and other selected languages. The languages were chosen according to the L1s of the students in the study. The purpose is not to provide a comprehensive description of the languages, but to illustrate some of the areas of possible interference or negative transfer. The main sources of the information in this section are the book *Learner English: a teacher's guide to interference and other problems* by Michael Swan and Bernard Smith (2001) and the instructor's support package for the book *Keys for Writers: A Brief Handbook* by Ann Raimes (2002).

This section also contains the most frequent linguistic writing errors based on the learners' L1s. The data come from the writing of the 343 students mentioned before. This information should provide you with a better understanding of your students' errors as well as a better idea of where the students are starting. It could help you plan and follow specific writing instruction as well as well-timed and appropriate strategies on error correction.

# Spanish Language

The following information shows some features of the Spanish language and possible L1 interference.

<b>Determiners/Articles</b>	<p>The definite article is used for generalization and proper nouns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* The food is more important than the clothes.</li> <li>* The professor Smith teaches in Canada.</li> </ul> <p>Singular count nouns sometimes do not need articles.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* My brother is doctor.</li> </ul>
<b>Verbs and Tenses</b>	<p>Verbs with transitive and intransitive possibilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Martha went up the chair (Meaning → <i>Martha took the chair up</i>).</li> </ul> <p>Many <i>Be + adjective</i> phrases are expressed by <i>have + adjective</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* have hunger ; have reason ( Meaning → <i>be hungry; be right</i>)</li> </ul> <p>Present tenses where English uses the perfect.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* How long are you living here?</li> <li>* It's a long time that I live here.</li> </ul> <p>Trying to use <i>used to</i> to express frequency in present time because of the frequentative verb in Spanish that allows all tenses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* I use to do a lot of exercise. ( Meaning → <i>I usually do a lot of exercise</i>)</li> </ul>
<b>Prepositions</b>	<p>Prepositions go with the noun phrase.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* For what have you gone there?</li> </ul> <p>A preposition can be followed by an infinitive.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* After to see the movie, we went to eat.</li> <li>* I'm eating well for lose weight.</li> </ul>
<b>Spelling</b>	<p>Close correspondence between pronunciation and spelling, unlike English.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Diferent</li> <li>* Crak</li> </ul>
<b>Word Order</b>	<p>Freer word order.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Yesterday played very well the soccer team.</li> </ul> <p>Adjectives usually go after nouns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* I live in the house brown.</li> </ul> <p>An indirect object must have a preposition; the two objects can go in either order; and adverbials and object complements are frequently placed before a direct object.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* She gave to Paul the book.</li> <li>* We took to the hospital her father.</li> </ul>

\* Sample of L1 interference error in English

# Spanish: Frequent Errors

Of the 343 participants, 169 were native speakers of Spanish.

Figure 3. *Most Frequent Linguistic Writing Errors Made by Spanish Speakers*

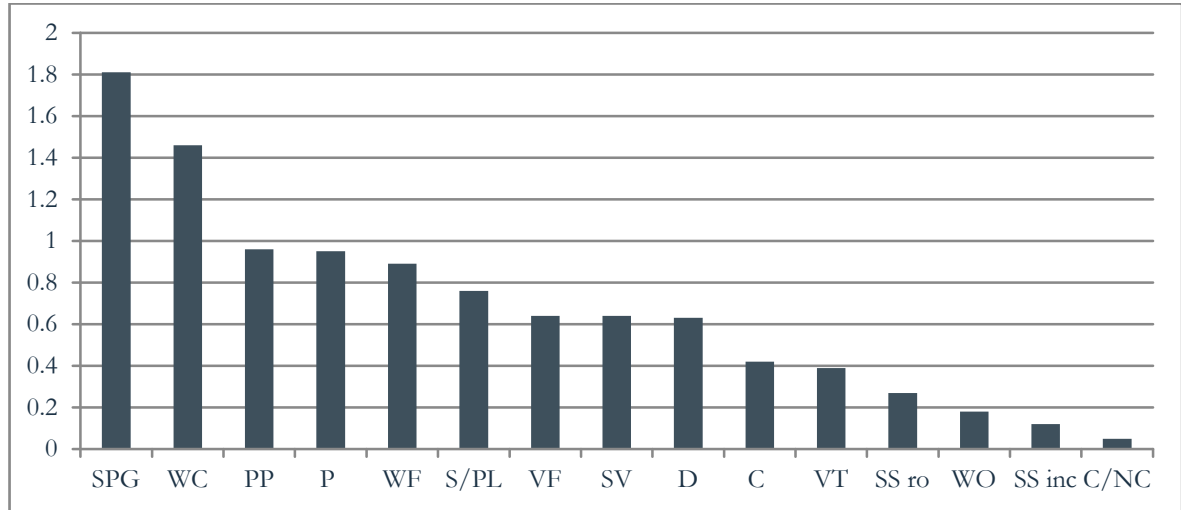


Table 4. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Category - Spanish*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=169
SPG	306	17.78	1.81
WC	246	12.29	1.46
PP	162	9.41	0.96
P	161	9.36	0.95
WF	151	8.77	0.89
S/PL	129	7.5	0.76
VF	109	6.33	0.64
SV	108	6.28	0.64
D	106	6.16	0.63
C	71	4.13	0.42
VT	66	3.83	0.39
SS ro	46	2.67	0.27
WO	30	1.74	0.18
SS inc	21	1.22	0.12
C/NC	9	0.52	0.05
Total	1721	100	

Note: Some error numbers and percentages were rounded.

Table 4 shows the total number of errors made by native speakers of Spanish for each category of linguistic errors as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the five most frequent errors are spelling (1.81), word choice (1.46), preposition (0.96), punctuation (0.95), and word form (0.89).

Figure 4. *Most Frequent Writing Error Families by Spanish Speakers*

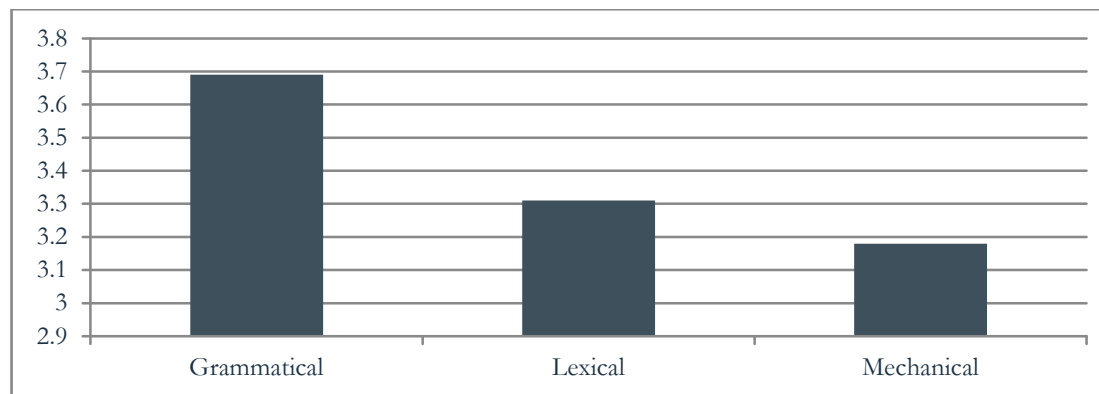


Table 5. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Error Family – Spanish*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=169
Grammatical	624	36.26	3.69
Lexical	559	32.48	3.31
Mechanical	538	31.26	3.18
Total	1721	100	

Table 5 shows the total number of errors for each error family as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the most frequent error family is grammatical (3.69), followed by lexical (3.31), and then mechanical (3.18).

# Korean Language

The following information shows some features of the Korean language and the possible L1 interference.

<b>Determiners/Articles</b>	No indefinite article. Sometimes mistakenly used <i>one</i> for <i>a</i> . * He is teacher. * She ran into one tree.
<b>Verbs and Tenses</b>	No equivalents of <i>there is/there are</i> or the empty <i>it</i> subject. * Many foreigners exist in London. * The book says three reasons to take vitamins. * This weekend will cold.  The verb <i>to exist</i> in English functions as the verb <i>to have</i> . * In my apartment cat exist. (Meaning → <i>I have a cat</i> )  No perfect aspect. * From yesterday to today snow coming. (Meaning → <i>It has been snowing since yesterday</i> )  Verbs do not agree in number or person with the subject. * My brother have two dogs.  A verb + preposition is difficult to compose. * This pencil is easy to write.
<b>Prepositions</b>	Use of postpositions (morphemes or short words that come after the words they modify). * School is library next to. (Meaning → <i>The school is next to the library</i> )
<b>Spelling</b>	Koreans are exposed to the Latin script, so there are no particular problems with the English writing system, except those that are similar to Spanish speakers: Close correspondence between pronunciation and spelling, unlike English. * diferent
<b>Word Order</b>	Subject + object +verb. Verbs go last. * The teacher the book collected. *My friend the car drove.

\* Sample of L1 interference error in English

# Korean: Frequent Errors

From the 343 participants, 58 were Korean speaking students.

Figure 5. *Most Frequent Linguistic Writing Errors Made by Korean Speakers*

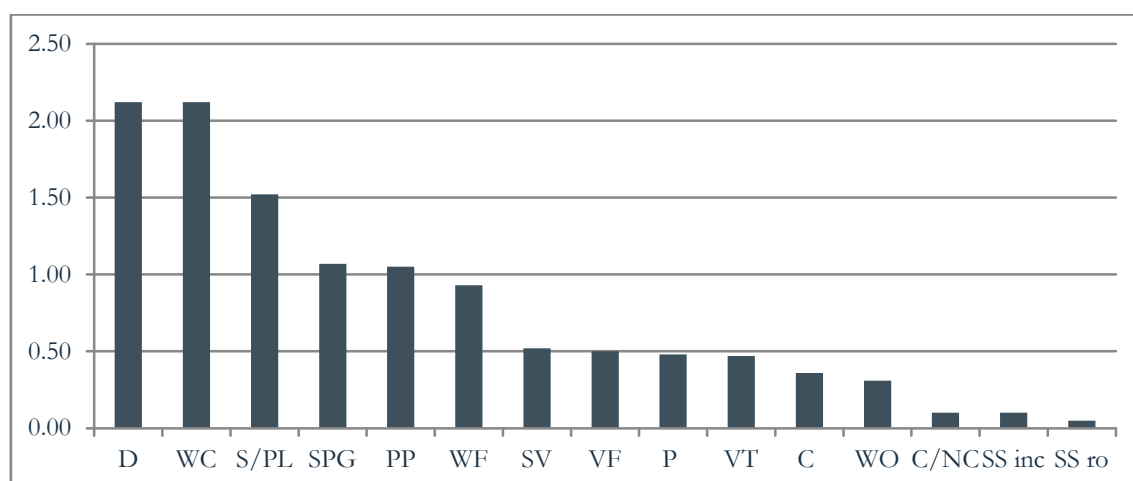


Table 6. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Category – Korean*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=58
D	123	18.11	2.12
WC	123	18.11	2.12
S/PL	88	12.96	1.52
SPG	62	9.13	1.07
PP	61	8.98	1.05
WF	54	7.95	0.93
SV	30	4.42	0.52
VF	29	4.27	0.50
P	28	4.12	0.48
VT	27	3.98	0.47
C	21	3.09	0.36
WO	18	2.65	0.31
C/NC	6	0.88	0.10
SS inc	6	0.88	0.10
SS ro	3	0.44	0.05
<b>Total</b>	<b>679</b>	<b>100</b>	

Note: Some error numbers and percentages were rounded.



Table 6 shows the total number of errors made by native speakers of Korean for each category of linguistic errors as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the five most common errors are determiner (2.12), word choice (2.12), singular/plural (1.52), spelling (1.07), and preposition (1.05).

Figure 6. *Most Frequent Writing Error Families by Korean Speakers*

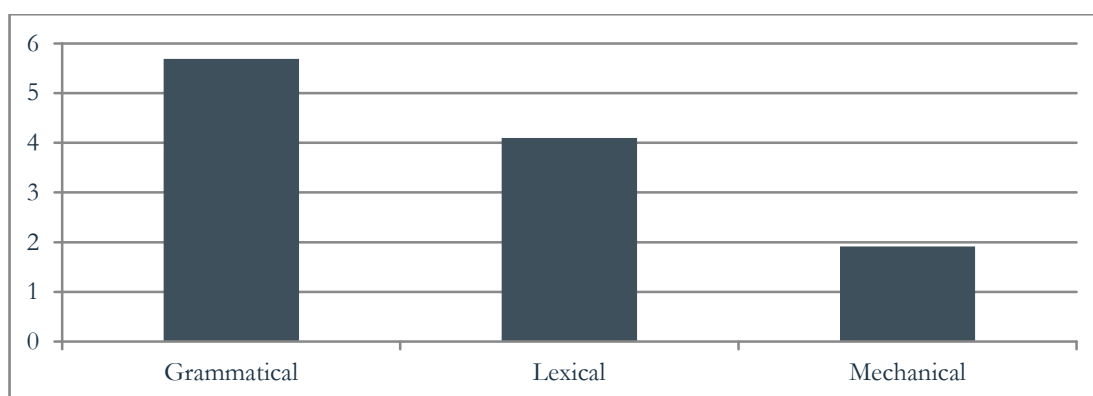


Table 7. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Error Family – Korean*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=58
Grammatical	330	48.60	5.69
Lexical	238	35.05	4.10
Mechanical	111	16.35	1.91
Total	679	100	

Table 7 shows the total number of errors for each error family as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the most frequent error family is grammatical (5.69), followed by lexical (4.10), and then mechanical (1.91).

# Portuguese Language

The following information shows some features of the Portuguese language and the possible L1 interference.

<b>Determiners/Articles</b>	<p>The definite article is used for generalization and proper nouns.            * The life is difficult            * I bought it in the University Street.</p> <p>Articles and determiners commonly used together before possessives.            * She wanted to borrow the my book.</p>
<b>Verbs and Tenses</b>	<p>To express the idea of duration, the simple present is used with <i>it is</i>.            * It is years that I don't see you.</p> <p>There is no present perfect progressive. Present tense is used instead.            * I am here since one o'clock.            * I am studying English for two years.</p> <p>No equivalent of <i>there is/there are</i>. <i>Have</i> and <i>exist</i> are used instead.            * Has wonderful beaches in Brazil.            * Exist a lot of restaurants.</p>
<b>Prepositions</b>	<p>Some common mistakes reflecting Portuguese prepositional usage:            * interested with/for; worried with; to pay attention in; based in; to rely in; to like of something; to marry with someone.</p> <p>Prepositions go with the noun phrase.            * With who did you go?</p>
<b>Spelling</b>	<p>Close correspondence between pronunciation and spelling, unlike English.            * Efcient</p>
<b>Word Order</b>	<p>Freer word order.            * Ice-cream I love.</p> <p>Adjectives usually go after nouns            * It was a problem very difficult.</p> <p>Adverbs and adverbial phrases can separate a verb from its object.            * I like very much ice-cream.</p> <p>Personal pronouns can be before or after the verb.            * They me explained the problem.</p>

\* Sample of L1 interference error in English

# Portuguese: Frequent Errors

From the 343 participants, 51 were native speakers of Portuguese.

Figure 7. *Most Frequent Linguistic Writing Errors Made by Portuguese Speakers*

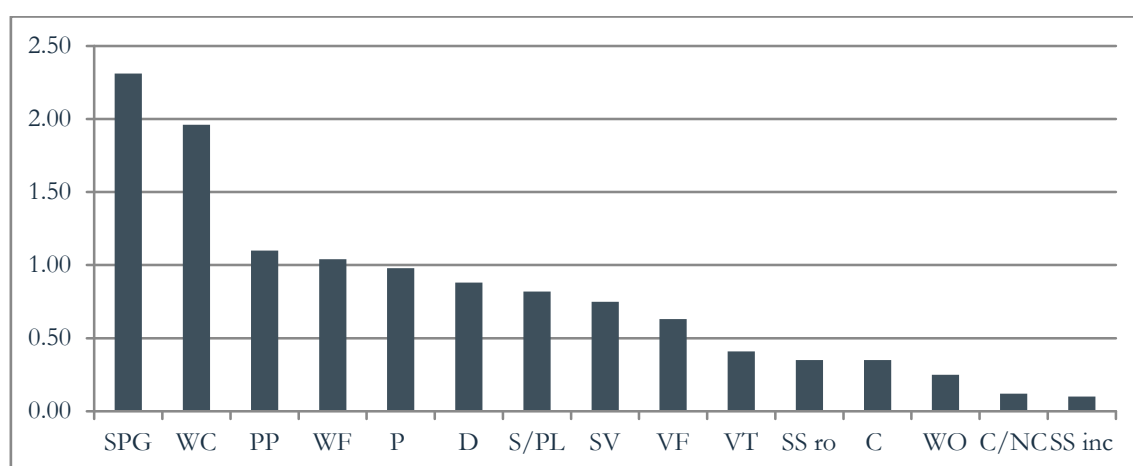


Table 8. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Category – Portuguese*

Errors	Total no. Of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=51
SPG	118	19.19	2.31
WC	100	16.26	1.96
PP	56	9.11	1.10
WF	53	8.62	1.04
P	50	8.13	0.98
D	45	7.32	0.88
S/PL	42	6.83	0.82
SV	38	6.18	0.75
VF	32	5.2	0.63
VT	21	3.41	0.41
SS ro	18	2.93	0.36
C	18	2.93	0.35
WO	13	2.11	0.25
C/NC	6	0.98	0.12
SS inc	5	0.81	0.10
Total	615	100	

Note: Some error numbers and percentages were rounded.

Table 8 shows the total number of errors made by native speakers of Portuguese for each category of linguistic errors as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the five most common errors are spelling (2.31), word choice (1.96), preposition (1.10), word form (1.04), and punctuation (0.98).

Figure 8. *Most Frequent Writing Error Families by Portuguese Speakers*

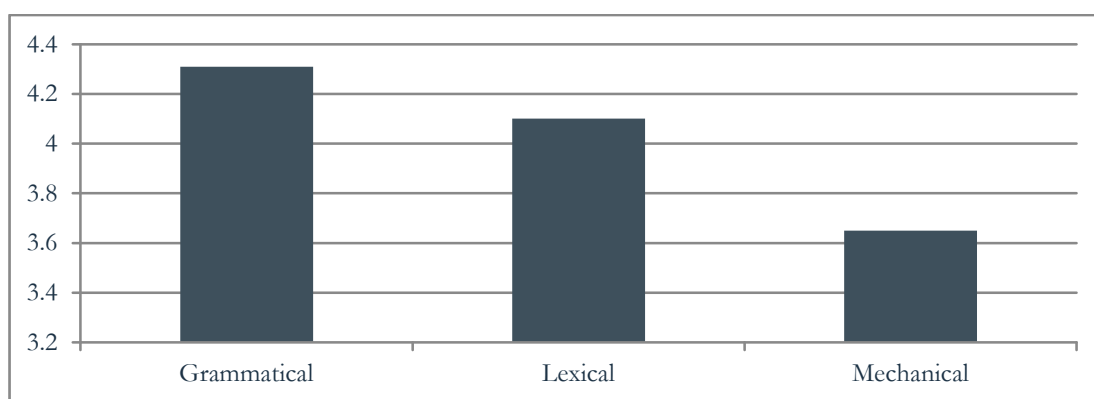


Table 9. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Error Family – Portuguese*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=51
Grammatical	220	35.77	4.31
Lexical	209	33.98	4.10
Mechanical	186	30.24	3.65
Total	615	100	

Table 9 shows the total number of errors for each error family as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the most frequent error family is grammatical (4.31), closely followed by lexical (4.10), and then mechanical (3.65).

# Chinese Language

The following information shows some features of the Chinese language and the possible L1 interference.

<b>Determiners/Articles</b>	No articles. * She is doctor. * I got book I wanted.
<b>Verbs and Tenses</b>	The verbs are not conjugated to express time relations. * I sit here for a long time. * John will go by the time she gets here.  Adjectives and verbs are frequently identical. This is why the verb <i>to be</i> tends to be dropped when followed by predicate adjectives. * I tired. * He very sad.  No differentiation between subjunctive and indicative mood. * It's time that you should eat. * If I am you, I won't call. * I suggest that this candidate may be considered at the next interview.
<b>Prepositions</b>	Prepositions serve complex functions, so errors occur frequently. * Mary is suffering with cold. * The book is too easy to me.
<b>Spelling</b>	Non-alphabetic writing system, so difficulties learning spelling patterns. * Wenesday * Anser
<b>Word Order</b>	Noun modifiers come before the nouns they modify. * That is very easy to solve problem. * That is serious something.  Adverbials usually come before verbs and adjectives. * Tomorrow morning she'll go.  Word order is the same in both statements and questions. * John and Tom last summer went where?  Sentences often start with a "topicalized" subject or object which is separated from the rest of the sentence. * Old people must respect. (Meaning → <i>We must respect old people</i> )

\* Sample of L1 interference error in English

# Chinese: Frequent Errors

From the 343 participants, 25 were native speakers of Chinese.

Figure 9. *Most Frequent Linguistic Writing Errors Made by Chinese Speakers*

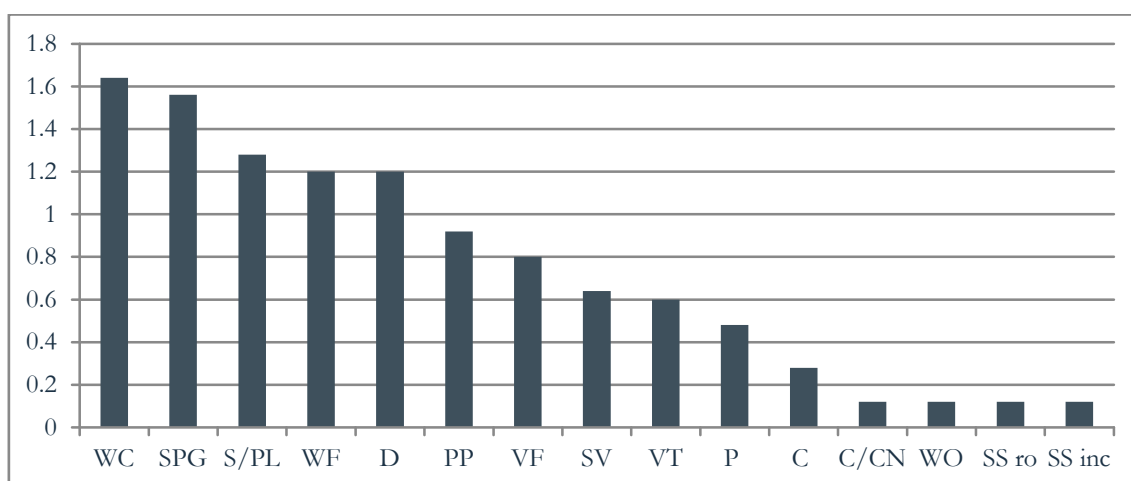


Table 10. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Category – Chinese*

Errors	Total no. Of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=25
WC	41	14.8	1.64
SPG	39	14.08	1.56
S/PL	32	11.55	1.28
WF	30	10.83	1.20
D	30	10.83	1.20
PP	23	8.3	0.92
VF	20	7.22	0.80
SV	16	5.78	0.64
VT	15	5.42	0.60
P	12	4.33	0.48
C	7	2.53	0.28
C/NC	3	1.08	0.12
WO	3	1.08	0.12
SS ro	3	1.08	0.12
SS inc	3	1.08	0.12
Total	277	100	

Note: Some error numbers and percentages were rounded.

Table 10 shows the total number of errors made by native speakers of Chinese for each category of linguistic errors as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the five most common errors are word choice (1.64), spelling (1.56), singular/plural (1.28), word form (1.20), and determiner (1.20).

Figure 10. *Most Frequent Writing Error Families by Chinese Speakers*

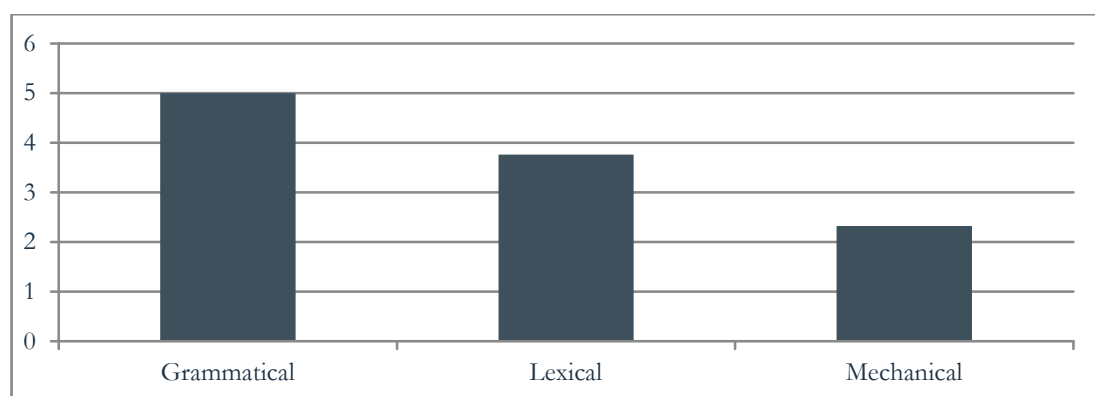


Table 11. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Error Family – Chinese*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=25
Grammatical	125	45.13	5.00
Lexical	94	33.94	3.76
Mechanical	58	20.94	2.32
Total	277	100	

Table 11 shows the total number of errors for each error family as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the most frequent error family is grammatical (5), followed by lexical (3.76), and then mechanical (2.32).

# Japanese Language

The following information shows some features of the Japanese language and the possible L1 interference.

<b>Determiners/Articles</b>	No articles. * I bought pen. * She is teacher.
<b>Verbs and Tenses</b>	Verbs can stand as a sentence on their own, so a subject or object is not required. * Did you get the potatoes? Yes. Went to market and bought.  One-word verb forms only; no auxiliary verbs. * They are write to each other in Spanish.  The use of passive differs from English. * They were stolen their bags. (Meaning → <i>They had their bags stolen</i> )  Indirect speech maintains the original tense. * They said they can come.
<b>Prepositions</b>	Prepositions follow the noun. * I am looking this picture at.
<b>Spelling</b>	The Romanization of Japanese (the application of the Latin script to write the Japanese language) makes close correspondence between pronunciation and spelling, unlike English. * Diferent * Crak
<b>Word Order</b>	Subject-object-verb structure. * My brother stamps collected.  Frequently, the topic of a sentence, which may not be the subject, is stated separately at the beginning. * Those men do not understand at all. (Meaning → <i>I do not understand those men</i> ) * It should be opened more restaurants in this city.  <i>Much, many, little, and few</i> can be predicative. Restaurant is many. Milk is little.

\* Sample of L1 interference error in English



# Japanese: Frequent Errors

From the 343 participants, 22 were Japanese speaking students.

Figure 11. *Most Frequent Linguistic Writing Errors Made by Japanese Speakers*

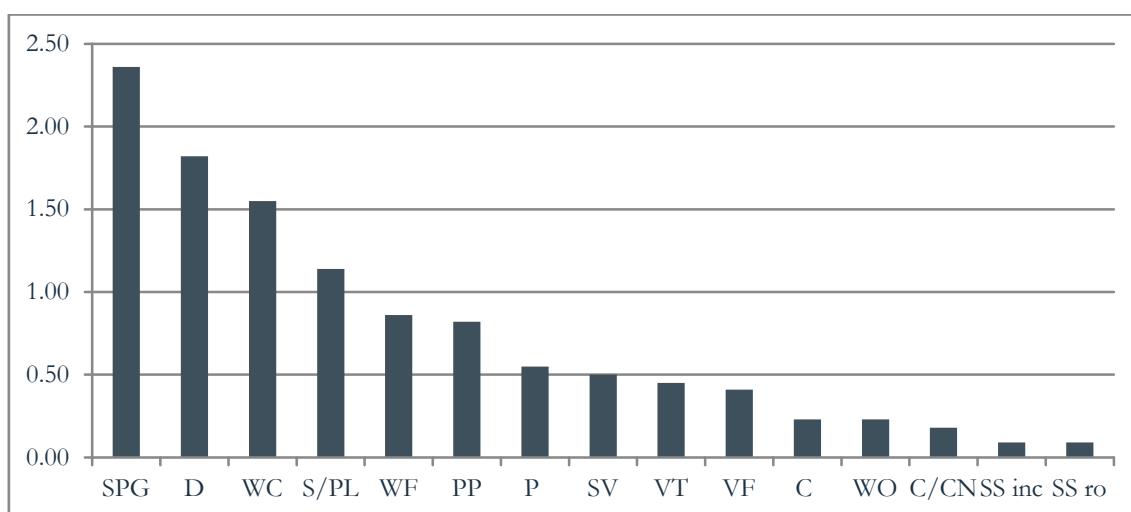


Table 12. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Category – Japanese*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=22
SPG	52	20.97	2.36
D	40	16.13	1.82
WC	34	13.71	1.55
S/PL	25	10.08	1.14
WF	19	7.66	0.86
PP	1	7.26	0.82
P	12	4.84	0.55
SV	11	4.44	0.50
VT	10	4.03	0.45
VF	9	3.63	0.41
C	5	2.02	0.23
WO	5	2.02	0.23
C/NC	4	1.61	0.18
SS inc	2	0.81	0.09
SS ro	2	0.81	0.09
<b>Total</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>100</b>	

Note: Some error numbers and percentages were rounded.

Table 12 shows the total number of errors made by Japanese speaking learners for each category of linguistic errors as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the five most common errors are spelling (2.36), determiner (1.82), word choice (1.55), singular/plural (1.14), and word form (0.86).

Figure 12. *Most Frequent Writing Error Families by Japanese Speakers*

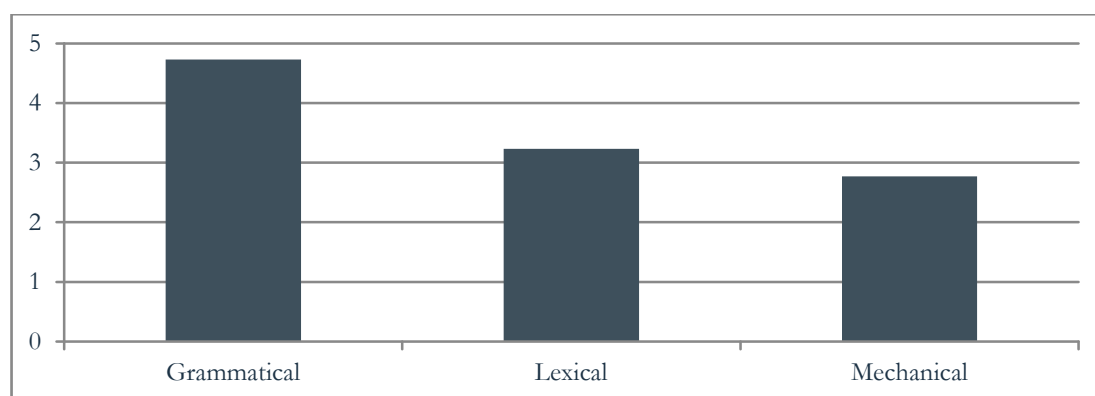


Table 13. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Error Family – Japanese*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=22
Grammatical	108	43.55	4.91
Lexical	71	28.63	3.23
Mechanical	69	27.82	3.14
Total	248	100	

Table 13 shows the total number of errors for each error family as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the most frequent error family is grammatical (4.91), followed by lexical (3.23), and then mechanical (3.14).

# Russian Language

The following information shows some features of the Russian language and the possible L1 interference.

<b>Determiners/Articles</b>	No articles. * New restaurant is building near my house. * Moon is beautiful.
<b>Verbs and Tenses</b>	No perfect or past progressive tenses. * I still didn't go to the market. * She said she already finished work.  No present perfect or present progressive forms. Only one simple present tense. * We live here long. * Your document is printed now.  No future perfect or future progressive forms. * Tom will work here five years by Monday.  <i>To be</i> is not used in the present tense. * She good girl.  Simpler modal system. * She can to do it. * I will can do it.
<b>Prepositions</b>	Mistaken use or omissions of prepositions. * I listen music in the morning.  No equivalent of English adverb particles; nor does postposition exist. * What is he laughing?
<b>Spelling</b>	Close correspondence between pronunciation and spelling, unlike English. * Raisen (Risen)
<b>Word Order</b>	Frequently, sentences begin with adverbial phrases of time and place. * Yesterday on bed put my key.  Verbs precede subject. * Good compliments received every speaker in the conference.

\* Sample of L1 interference error in English

## Russian: Frequent Errors

From the 343 participants, 18 were native speakers of Russian.

Figure 12. *Most Frequent Linguistic Writing Errors Made by Russian Speakers*

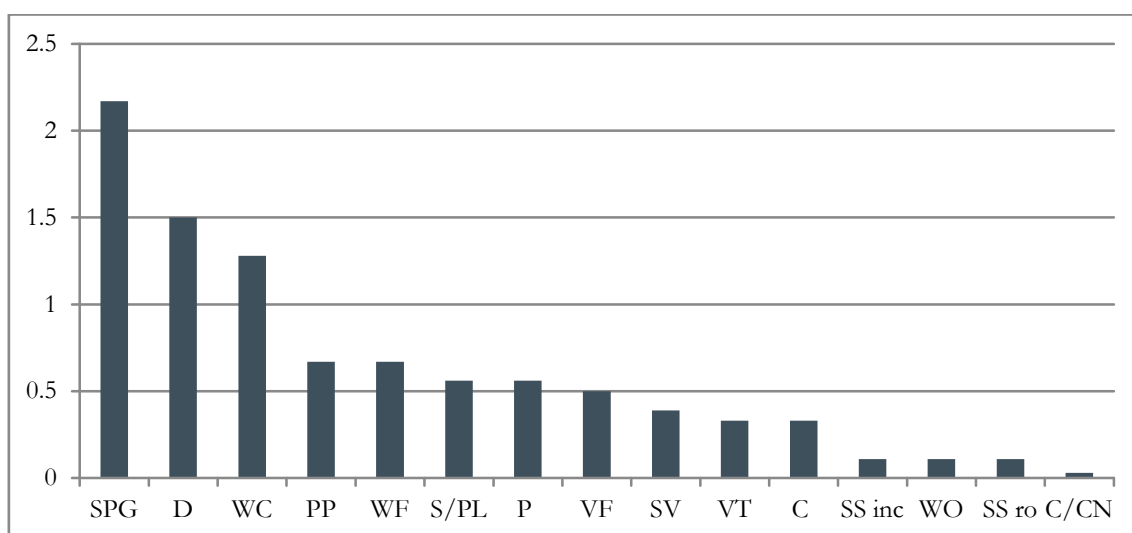


Table 13. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Category – Russian*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=18
SPG	39	23.35	2.17
D	27	16.17	1.50
WC	23	13.77	1.28
PP	12	7.19	0.67
WF	12	7.19	0.67
S/PL	10	5.99	0.56
P	10	5.99	0.56
VF	9	5.39	0.50
SV	7	4.19	0.39
VT	6	3.59	0.33
C	6	3.59	0.33
SS inc	2	1.2	0.11
WO	2	1.2	0.11
SS ro	2	1.2	0.11
C/NC	0.5	0.3	0.03
<b>Total</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>100</b>	

Note: Some error numbers and percentages were rounded.

Table 13 shows the total number of errors made by native speakers of Russian for each category of linguistic errors as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the five most common errors are spelling (2.17), determiner (1.50), word choice (1.28), preposition (0.67), and word form (0.67).

Figure 13. *Most Frequent Writing Error Families by Russian speakers*

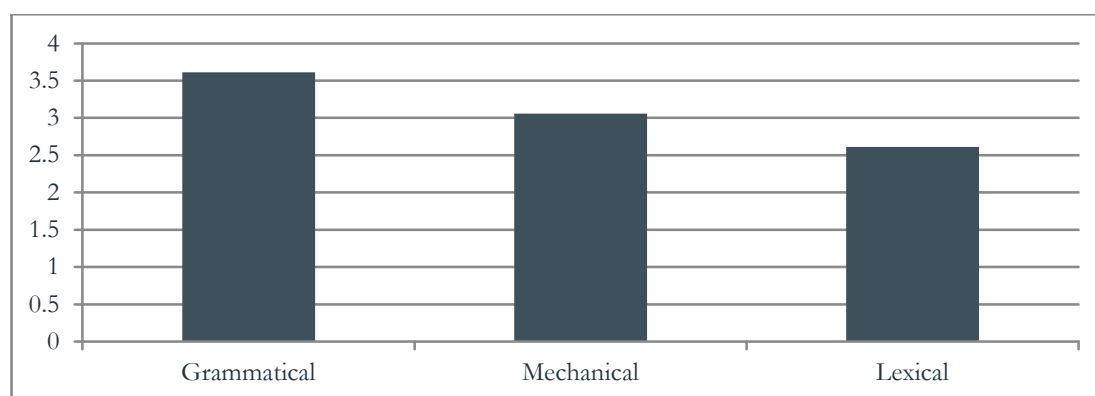


Table 14. *Total Number of Errors per Paragraph and Percentage per Error Family – Russian*

Errors	Total no. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean N=18
Grammatical	65	38.92	3.61
Mechanical	55	32.93	3.06
Lexical	47	28.14	2.61
Total	167	100	

Table 14 shows the total number of errors for each error family as well as its percentage and mean value. The results of the mean values show that the most frequent error family by far is grammatical (3.61), followed by mechanical (3.06), and then lexical (2.61).

# ERROR COMPARISONS

This section shows a comparison of the frequency of each linguistic error category by L1s. Even though it is important to remember to not stereotype languages and to look carefully at the writing of each individual student (Raimes & Sofer, 2002), a comparison of error frequency between L1s, however, could explain some writing patterns.

Comparing the results in the tables and figures of the most frequent errors by L1s, we can see that some error types are more frequent or common for some language groups of students. The following figures show this comparison. A statistical assessment was done to see if there were any significant differences among languages.

Figure 14. *Spelling Error by L1*

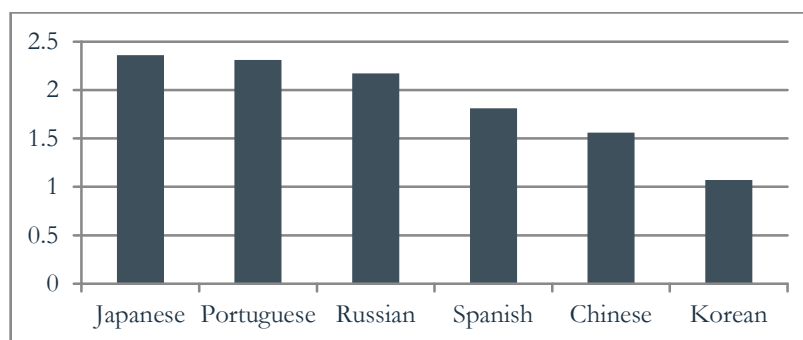


Table 15. *Spelling Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Korean	58	1.0745
Chinese	25	1.5784
Spanish	169	1.8080
Russian	18	2.1783
Portuguese	51	2.3190
Japanese	22	2.3436
Sig.		.174

Spelling correctly seems to be equally difficult for all students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.

Figure 15. *Word Choice Error by L1*

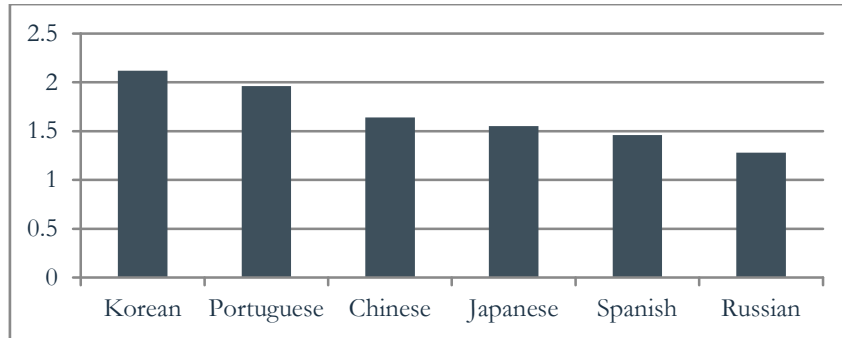


Table 16. *Word Choice Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Russian	18	1.2539
Spanish	169	1.4533
Japanese	22	1.5518
Chinese	25	1.6380
Portuguese	51	1.9525
Korean	58	2.1162
Sig.		.651

Word choice also seems to be equally difficult for all students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.

Figure 16. *Determiner Error by L1*

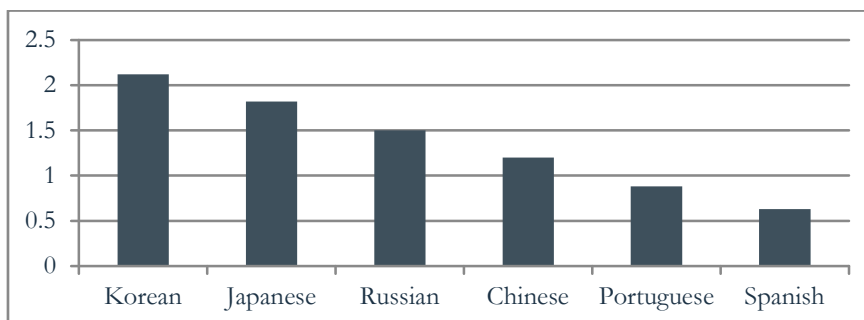


Table 17. *Determiner Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =00.5		
		1	2	3
Spanish	169	.6244		
Portuguese	51	.8882	0.8882	
Chinese	25	1.1948	1.1948	1.1948
Russian	18	1.5139	1.5139	1.5139
Japanese	22		1.8155	1.8155
Korean	58			2.1214
Sig.		.117	.090	.091

Determiners seem to be statistically more difficult for native speakers of Korean, Japanese, Russian, and Chinese.

Figure 17. *Preposition Error by L1*

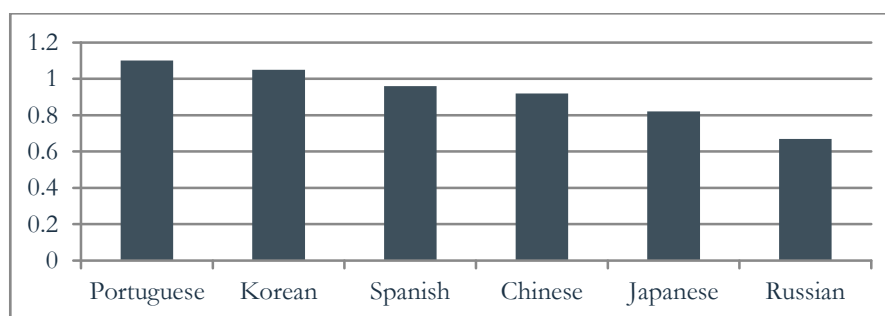


Table 18. *Preposition Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Russian	18	.6772
Japanese	22	.8014
Chinese	25	.9048
Spanish	169	.9598
Korean	58	1.0555
Portuguese	51	1.0943
Sig.		.355

Prepositions seem to be equally difficult for all students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.



Figure 18. *Singular/Plural Error by L1*

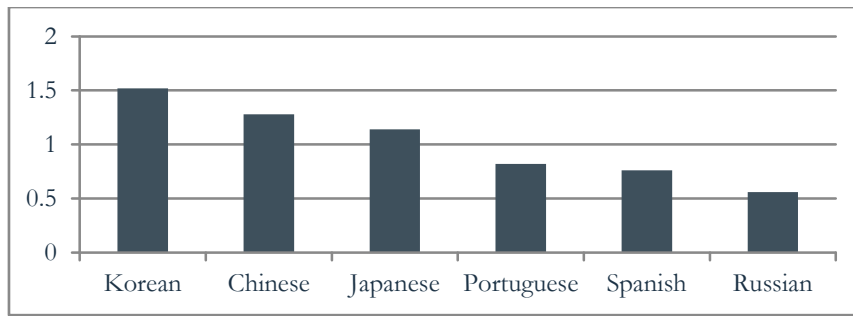


Table 19. *Singular/Plural Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =00.5		
		1	2	3
Russian	18	.5728		
Spanish	169	.7621	.7621	
Portuguese	51	.8259	.8259	
Japanese	22	1.1327	1.1327	1.1327
Chinese	25		1.2928	1.2928
Korean	58			1.5138
Sig.		.183	.235	.607

Singular/plural seems to be statistically more difficult for native speakers of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese, and less difficult for native speakers of Russian, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Figure 19. *Word Form Error by L1*

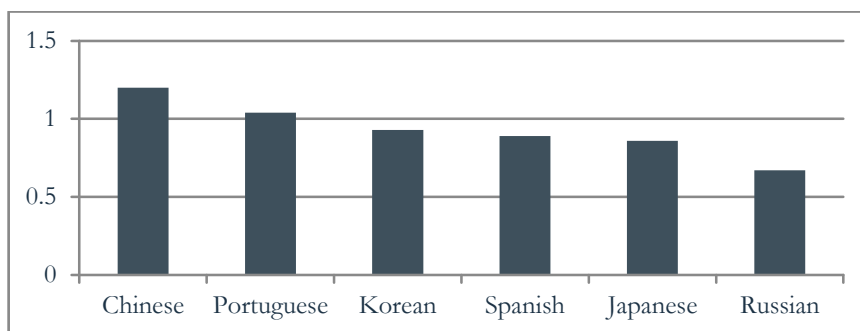


Table 20. *Word Form Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Russian	18	.6739
Japanese	22	.8723
Spanish	169	.8953
Korean	58	.9366
Portuguese	51	1.0337
Chinese	25	1.2136
Sig.		.132

Word form seems to be equally difficult for all students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.

Figure 20. *Subject-Verb Agreement Error by L1*

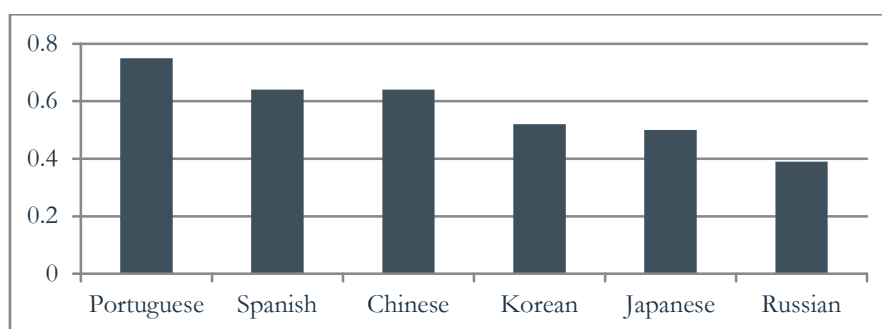


Table 21. *Subject-Verb Agreement Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05
		1
Russian	18	.4117
Japanese	22	.4800
Korean	58	.5248
Spanish	169	.6384
Chinese	25	.6540
Portuguese	51	.7484
Sig.		.244

Subject-verb agreement seems to be equally difficult for students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.

Figure 21. *Verb Form Error by L1*

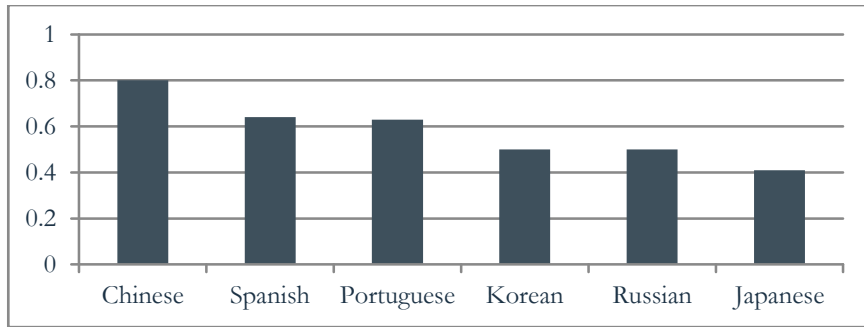


Table 22. *Verb Form Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =00.5	
		1	2
Japanese	22	.4055	
Korean	58	.4936	.4936
Russian	18	.4989	.4989
Portuguese	51	.6320	.6320
Spanish	169	.6473	.6473
Chinese	25		.8160
Sig.		.492	.178

Verb form seems to be statistically more difficult for native speakers of Chinese, and less difficult for native speakers of Japanese.

Figure 22. *Verb Tense Error by L1*

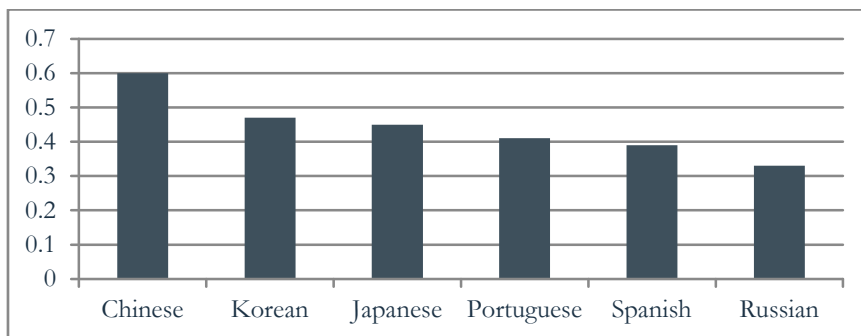


Table 23. *Verb Tense Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =00.5	
		1	2
Russian	18	.3189	
Spanish	169	.3910	.3910
Portuguese	51	.4143	.4143
Korean	58	.4647	.4647
Japanese	22	.4714	.4714
Chinese	25		.6068
Sig.		.558	.177

Verb tense seems to be statistically more difficult for native speakers of Chinese, and less difficult for native speakers of Russian.

Figure 23. *Capitalization Error by L1*

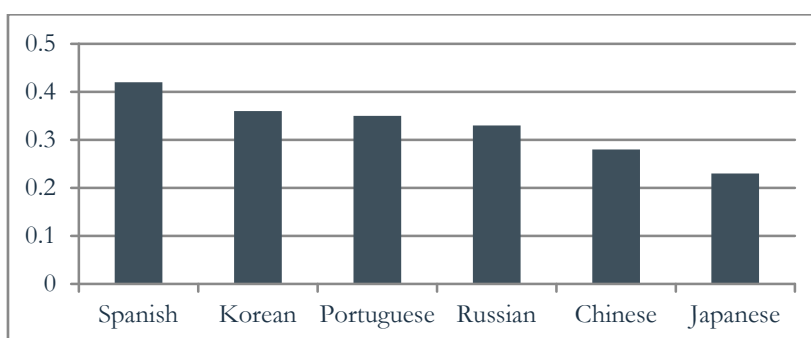


Table 24. *Capitalization Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Japanese	22	.2482
Chinese	25	.2824
Russian	18	.3178
Portuguese	51	.3447
Korean	58	.3629
Spanish	169	.4182
Sig.		.764

Capitalization seems to be equally difficult for all students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.

Figure 24. *Run-On Sentence Error by L1*

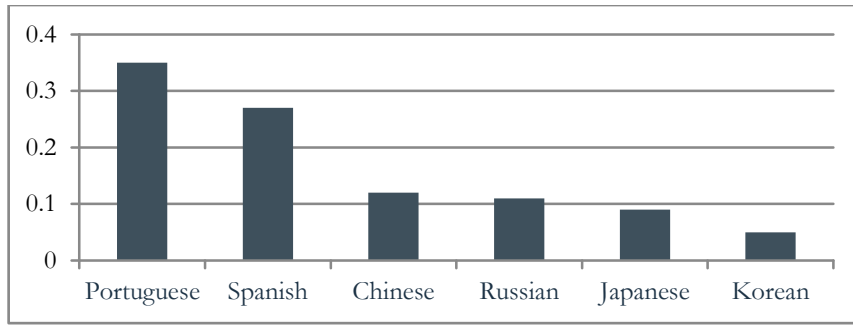


Table 25. *Run-On Sentence Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Korean	58	.0576
Japanese	22	.0900
Chinese	25	.1168
Russian	18	.1189
Spanish	169	.2740
Portuguese	51	.3594
Sig.		.071

Curiously, despite the mean values, there is no significant difference in run-on sentence error among languages. However, native speakers of Portuguese and Spanish in the study made more run-on sentences errors than the other students.

Figure 25. *Word Order Error by L1*

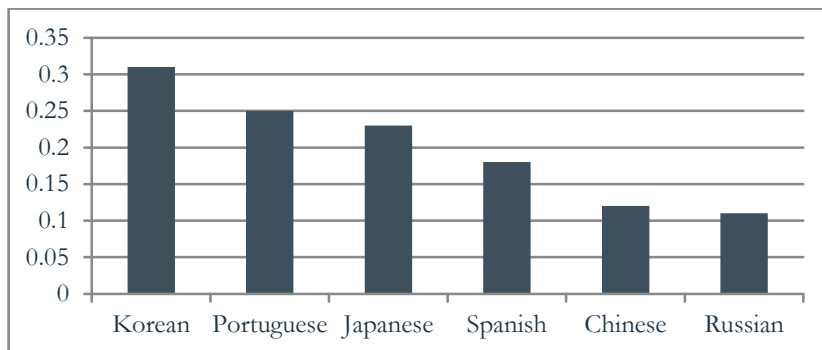


Table 26. Word Order *Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Russian	18	.1256
Chinese	25	.1264
Spanish	169	.1764
Japanese	22	.2391
Portuguese	51	.2559
Korean	58	.3079
Sig.		.127

Word order seems to be equally difficult for all students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.

Figure 26. *Sentence Incomplete Error by L1*

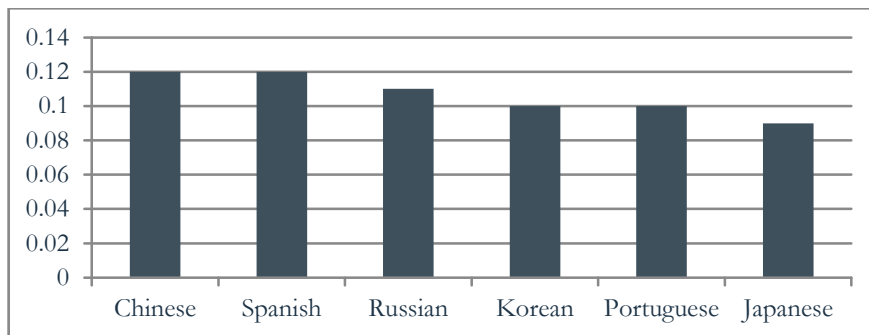


Table 27. Sentence Incomplete *Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Portuguese	51	0.906
Korean	58	.1033
Japanese	22	.1055
Chinese	25	.1152
Spanish	169	.1241
Russian	18	.1256
Sig.		.984

Sentence incomplete error seems to be equally difficult for all students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.

Figure 27. *Count/Non Count Error by L1*

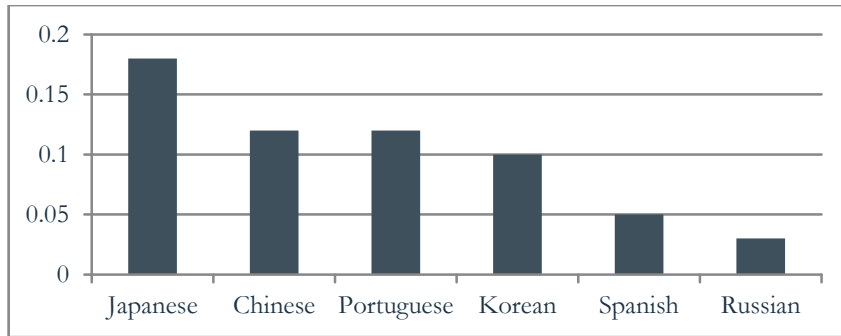


Table 28. *Count/Non Count Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =00.5		
		1	2	3
Russian	18	.0250		
Spanish	169	.0509	.0509	
Korean	58	.1109	.1109	.1109
Portuguese	51	.1167	.1167	.1167
Chinese	25		.1360	.1360
Japanese	22			.1700
Sig.		0.96	.150	.541

Count/Non count error seems to be statistically more difficult for native speakers of Japanese when compared to native speakers of Spanish or Russian. Similarly there is a statistically significant difference between native speakers of Chinese and Russian.

Figure 28. *Punctuation Error by L1*

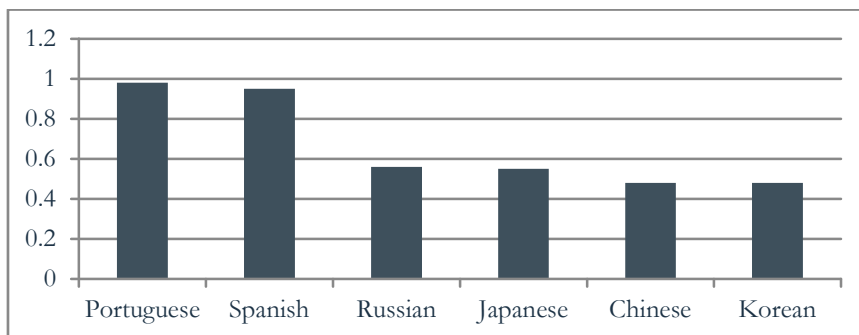


Table 29. *Punctuation Error Statistics by L1*

Language	N	Subset for alpha =0.05
		1
Chinese	25	.4724
Korean	58	.4793
Russian	18	.5472
Japanese	22	.5627
Spanish	169	.9537
Portuguese	51	.9833
Sig.		.153

Punctuation seems to be equally difficult for all students, since there is no statistical difference among languages.

While many of these comparisons show similarities, we should be aware of patterns of error among language groups of students. This could help us to look for those common errors that are repeated in our students' writing and provide more specific feedback. As Dana Ferris in her book *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing* points out, "This selective error-correction strategy helps students learn to make focused passes through their texts to find particular types of errors to which they may be most prone and to master grammatical terms and rules related to those specific errors" (as cited in Dodge, n.d.).



# REFLECTION

I hope this information in this booklet helps you know what to expect in your next writing course in terms of linguistic writing errors. Now that you are aware of the most frequent linguistic writing errors that your students may make, take a few minutes and reflect on the following questions:

1. What could I plan or include in my lesson to deal with the most frequent linguistic writing errors of my students?
2. How can I help my students be aware of their most frequent linguistic errors?
3. How could this awareness lead my students to self-correction and learning?
4. What writing strategies on error correction could I implement in my classroom to deal effectively and successfully with the frequent linguistic errors of my students?
5. What aspect of grammar should I focus on and in what order to help my student be more linguistically accurate in writing?



The implications of the findings presented in this booklet in relation to our students' learning should be well worth considering. As we have seen, the five most frequent errors for ESL/EFL learners are spelling, word choice, determiner, preposition, and singular/plural.

Among these five, spelling and word choice seem to be the most common and frequent errors for all ESL/EFL learners no matter their L1. Since these errors are made so frequently, why not include some spelling and vocabulary activities in our lesson plans? Some writing activities that focus on vocabulary and spelling could help learners think of words to use as part of the writing process and write those words correctly.

For instance, to improve our students' spelling skills, we could teach some spelling patterns. This does not have to take a long time, if we teach one spelling pattern per week (Shemesh & Waller, 2000). We



could also call attention to some words that sound similar and are often misspelled in writing. For example, we could introduce the words advice (noun) and advise (verb). We could also “encourage [our] students to use a separate notebook or file for the weekly spelling patterns, examples words, and spelling activities” (Shemesh and Waller, 2000, p. 7). Teaching spelling strategies to our students could be challenging, but it could also bring great rewards.

When thinking about how to improve our students' vocabulary knowledge in an effort to help them choose the correct word, we should keep in mind that understanding a word does not “predict productive use of the word” in writing (Lee, 2003, p. 551). Knowing a word means

more than knowing its meaning, it also includes a “word’s frequency, register, spelling, and collocations” (Folse, 2004, p. 1). Moreover, vocabulary knowledge can also help with grammar. The reason to believe this is “that knowing the words in a text or conversation permits learners to understand the meaning of the discourse, which in turn allows the grammatical patterning to become more transparent” (Schmitt, 2000, p. 143). Therefore, we could incorporate word choice activities in our lessons, such as teaching verbs that describe actions clearly and teaching descriptive adjectives and specific adverbs. Good word choice means “using the right words to say the right thing in just the right way” (Peha, 2003). Our students need to know the right words to use and how to use them correctly, and this could be part of our teaching goals.



Having knowledge of frequent linguistic errors and the possible L1 interference, together with my experience teaching ESL/EFL students, have made my job easier. Now, I am able to understand why my Spanish and Portuguese speaking students frequently miss the subject *it*, or why the sentences of my Korean speaking students do not make sense to me sometimes because the sentence structure is awkward. Likewise, I am also able to highlight these frequent errors to my students and explain why they are making those errors. This has made

them more aware of the errors they need to avoid. Now my students and I are not so frustrated because we can provide a “reason” for those errors. I hope this booklet can make your teaching job easier as well and be a key to understanding your students’ errors.

Now that you are more aware of the frequent writing errors as well as the possible L1 interference writing errors of your students, you are prepared to decide what to do in your classroom in terms of error correction and writing pedagogy to better serve and help your students improve their writing accuracy. Use this booklet to prepare your next lesson plan and writing conference. Remember that your students can also find this booklet very helpful. For example, they could learn much by knowing their L1 transfer errors in English. Many students simply know that “grammar” is one of their major weaknesses in writing. They do not know with specificity what parts of grammar cause them the most difficulty. Hence, if you come across confusing errors that are difficult to explain, go back to this booklet. It will help you and your students stay on the *write* track.

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