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Ecuadorian public high school students´ errors in EFL writing skills

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 Loja, marzo de 2017

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DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this thesis to God for the life and wisdom that He gave me to study and obtain the Bachelor Degree. To my family and especially to my parents who always have supported me. Also, this thesis is dedicated to my friends who have encouraged me to fulfill this goal.

Edwin

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<div align="right">Edwin</div>

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Abstract

The theme of this study is Ecuadorian public high school students´ errors in EFL writing skills, which purpose is to identify the types of writing errors made by the EFL learners, determine the most frequent error, and the causes that originate those errors.

This study was done in the city of Cuenca, being the sample for the investigation 70 students and 5 teachers from second year senior public high schools. Moreover, the instruments used to collect the information were students and teachers questionnaires, and a writing test.

The methods applied were quantitative and qualitative. The qualitative was used for the narrative data, while quantitative method was used for the numerical data to state the frequency and the recorded percentage of each error.

The findings reveal that were found different types of errors related to the grammatical such as subject-verb agreement, verb omission, pluralization of adjectives; mechanical errors such as spelling mistakes and lack of punctuation; and content of errors which include omission of transition words, and incorrect organization of ideas in a paragraph.

Key words: writing errors, EFL students, EFL classrooms.

Resumen

El tema de este estudio fue errores de escritura de estudiantes de colegios públicos en el Ecuador, su propósito es identificar los tipos de errores que cometen los estudiantes, los errores más frecuentes, y determinar las causas que originan tales errores.

La investigación se hizo en la ciudad de Cuenca, siendo la muestra 70 estudiantes de segundo año de bachillerato pertenecientes a dos colegios públicos, y 5 profesores de inglés. Los instrumentos que se utilizaron para recolectar datos fueron cuestionarios dirigidos a profesores y estudiantes, y una hoja para escritura.

Además, los métodos aplicados para el análisis de resultados fueron cuantitativos y cualitativos. El método cualitativo se utilizó para describir la información obtenida en los textos escritos, y el método cuantitativo para obtener datos numéricos.

Los resultados revelan que se identificó varios tipos de errores gramaticales tales como concordancia verbal, omisión de verbos, pluralización de adjetivos; entre los errores mecánicos se encontró problemas de ortografía y puntuación; y entre los de contenido se encontró omisión de palabras de transición e incorrecta organización de ideas en el párrafo.

Palabras claves: Errores de escritura, estudiantes de Ingles, clases de Inglés.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the writing performance plays a key role in acquiring a language, but mastering a good writing skill is a very hard task for the learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Most of EFL learners commit different types of errors in their writing texts. Thus, this paper tries to explain various types of errors that students produce in their writings; being the objective of this study to know what are the most frequent errors that interfere on the EFL writing performance.

The types of errors found in this study have been analyzed under three variables: grammar errors, content errors, and mechanical errors. For this purpose, three questions have been considered to analyze those subjects, such as: which error has the highest percentage in each variable? Which is the most frequent error in the students´ written texts? And, how do students and teachers perceive errors in EFL writing?

In order to support the current research, findings of previous studies that have been focused on investigating errors in EFL writing were considered as a source of information to reinforce this study. One of those studies was an investigation work carried out by Ngangbam (2016), its objective was to examine the English syntactic errors that students commit in their EFL writings. Findings revealed that the grammatical structures were the major difficult area in writing activities, in which the most frequent errors were the following: subject- verb agreement, several incomplete expressions and sentences, and omission or unnecessary use of prepositions. The second most common type of error were related to punctuation in which include misuse or overuse of comas and wrong use of periods.

As well, according to Ngangbam, there are other mistakes that recorded a lower frequency but they affect so much to produce excellent writings, in which include: overuse of coordinated clauses, difficulties in verbs tense, wrong use of phrasal verb, misuse of articles, poor vocabulary, and wrong organization of ideas in the texts.

Another study considered in this paper was carried out by Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013), it was focused on analyzing writing errors caused by the interference of the first language (L1), in three writing genres: namely narration, description, and comparison/contrast. In this study 16 categories of errors were analyzed: *verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, modal/auxiliary, singular/plural form, fragment, verb form, pronoun, run-on sentence, infinitive/gerund, transition, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparison structure*. Regarding the variable "narration", the most frequent errors about this were *wrong use of verb tense*, *word choice*, *sentence structure*, *misuse of preposition*, and *modal/auxiliary*; on the other hand, the most frequent errors about the variables "description" and "comparison/contrast" were the following *misuse of articles*, *wrong sentence structures, word choice, singular/plural form*, and *subject-verb agreement*.

The third previous study regarded in this paper was carried out by Shitu (2015), it had as objective to identify the errors, analyze their structural compositions, and find out whether there are patterns to the EFL writing errors.

The findings showed various types of errors produced by the students in their writing tasks. The first error found in this study was word choice errors; it means that the choice of one word or both words are erroneous. For example, the students wrote the phrases: "*Doing inspection*" instead of "*Conduct inspection*", "*I am full happy*" instead of "*I am very happy*". The second error found was word forms errors, these errors occur when the form of the word used is incorrect, for example: "*eat three meals*" in place of "*take three meal*"; "seriously *instability*" in place of "*serious instability*"; "*study deeply*" in place of "*study hard*".

In terms of combination of words, those are phrases that are make up by two words together, sometimes joined by a hyphen. The outcomes revealed that a great number of students had problem to identify those compound words, for instance, they used hyphen when

it is not required or vice versa. Here some examples gotten from the student's writings, one participant wrote the words: "*every- day*" in place of "*everyday*", "*for- ever*" in place of "*forever*". Additionally, the students also committed mistakes related to subject–verb agreement which marked a high level of occurrence.

On the other hand, the current research will provide important information about the kind of problems that Ecuadorian EFL learners face in their classrooms when they have to write texts in English. At the same time, it will allow English teachers as well as students to find out what are the negative factors that interfere to make a good writing project. Besides, this study is also focused on looking for the best strategies to overcome those problems, and help to the learners become better writers in English. Nonetheless, this study could be considered as a base for other studies about errors in EFL writing, generally for institutions and people involved in education field related to English language teaching.

Some limitations were found during the development of this study. Lack of willingness by the students to make the narrative paragraphs, and the small population. Another limitation was related to the fact that teachers did not provide additional information in questions where they were supposed to do it in order to explain better their responses.

In order to improve future investigations, it may be interesting to address research with participants from both types of high schools (private and public high schools) to compare the difference of English knowledge between those two groups of students.

Chapter I: Literature Review

This section intents to explain the scientific information related to students´ errors in EFL writing. The topics and subtopics that will be analyzed and supported by previous investigation and studies done around the world are the follow: writing (definition, importance and the process of writing); coherence, cohesion, and unity in written text; elements of writing (topic sentences, supporting sentences, transition words, punctuation, spelling, capitalization and grammar in EFL writings); errors in EFL writing (causes and types of errors).

Writing skill

Writing is an important skill in the teaching process that always has occupied an important place in most EFL classes. So, the integration in writing activities have been considered as an elemental technique to improve the writing and reading skills.

Definition. Writing is the performance or process of recording words in a a piece of paper that can be read and understood by the readers. According to Hathaway (2014), writing is one of the tools that helps EFL learners to improve their language knowledge because the writing skill allows them to express their ideas, thoughts, and their opinion about different topics through written passages. On the other hand, the same author also shows another perception about this theme and explains that writing is an instrument that enables learners to discuss about any topic and then transmit their understanding through the writen language, which helps them to improve their knowledge about vocabulary, grammar and steps to write texts. In fact, writing is an activity that allows learners to translate complex ideas into written messages using their own words.

A long the same lines of thinking, Stevens (2011) states that writing is one of the language skills which helps writers to express their thoughts into words in a meaningful form to interact with others through the written language; but, it is not just about conveying content

but also how they perform it following punctuation, spelling and grammatical structures. Indeed, the author argues that writing is a powerful means of self and social communication through formal or informal publications.

Importance. Writing is substantial in the process of EFL learning due to it provides the learners more thinking times than they get when they listen to spontaneous conversations. What is more, writing permits learners more opportunities for their language learning process, because writing activities not only become a normal part of classroom life but also gives chances to learners to accomplish instant success by chatting with others out of the classroom (Harmer, 2012).

In this way, Kottler, Kottler and Street (2008) claim that writing is one of the most useful activities to learn a language because it may be used as a cultural technique to improve the literacy skills of the students, for later engage them in a powerful learning process giving feedback to the learners according to their needs.

Similarly, Ghizan (2015) says that the process of reading and writing are the basic elements that aid to the EFL learners to improve their language knowledge. Reading permits learners to obtain new information and different points of view about a topic which help their cognitive competences to write a project, while writing guides learners to improve their language knowledge because the students have to think and look for the proper words to write a passage. The author concludes that these abilities support learners to foster their vocabulary and the ability to organize the main ideas to complete writing tasks correctly, and finally getting a good written text.

The writing process. According to some studies in this process are included different stages which going from developing an idea to publishing a piece of written work. In this way, Gura (2011) defines that the steps to write a text are established as general elements that help learners to comprehend the phases of a writing project, being those steps commonly used

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by the teachers to teach writing that involve the following statements: prewriting (collecting information, organizing ideas and material), drafting (putting the organized ideas in a real piece of writing, composed of complete sentences and paragraphs), revision (review unit of content), editing (to check spelling, puntuation, grammar), publishing (the project is finished and ready to be read by the audience).

Additionally to this previous information, Gould and Gould (2015) determine that the writing process requires a simultaneous integration of many critical parts and establish that the writing process is a multi-step procedure that a writer follows when going from original ideas to take them down on a paper and then publishing as a written text. Therefore, it has a prescribed sequence of steps which vary in number and name. Some common terminologies for the writing process steps are the following: focusing (topic choice, brainstorming), ordering (organizing the storm), drafting (getting it on paper), revising (editing-making the writing better), proofreading (correcting the mistakes), and publishing (sharing it with others).

Coherence, Cohesion, and Unity

Coherence. It is the result of a meaningful connection within a sentence, between sentences or paragraphs that contribute to the meaning of the whole piece of writing. Also, it is defined as the quality of writing something logically integrated with consistencies to avoid that the reader misunderstands the message. Hence, coherence has been seen as an individual linguistic element of any language that works proficiently to deliver a clear and logical message (Stirling, 2016).

Likewise, Lenski and Verbruggen (2010) expressed that to complete a good written text, it should include grammatical structures, proper words to link the sentences, and well organization of ideas in a logical and consistent form. As a matter of fact, coherence is an important factor in all the levels of a writing that includes from the sentence level up to the complete writing project, in formal or informal way. Thus, if the written arguments,

paragraphs, or whatever kind of written text do not have logical connection, they cannot be understood because they do not produce sense as a whole piece. For that reason, coherence is considered as a basic component of quality which has vital importance especially in formal writings, because when a passage does not contain coherence, it does not transmits an effective message.

Cohesion. This is one of the elements that every formal writing should contain to facilitate the comprehension of the text. It regards the use of grammatical and lexical linking within a text or sentence, which create ties among sentences and paragraphs. About this perception, Marsen (2013) explains that cohesion is the way of linking segments, phrases, or sentences within a text which are integrated to bring movement and transition from one idea to another about an specific topic. Also, the author argues that cohesion may be produced in a sentence, between sentences, and paragraphs, which is achieved through two ways: correct use of linkers known as lexical content and structural content based on grammar rules.

According to Peck and Coyle (2012), " in formal writings, every sentence has to be lexically and grammatically cohesive in order to make a text clear and comprehensible; it has to keep together as a unit" (p. 4). That is, it is possible to determine two main types of cohesion: lexical cohesion and grammatical cohesion. The first refers to the way in which related words are selected to link parts of a text, it is accomplished by the use of two tools: repetition and collocation; on the other hand, grammatical cohesion is based on the logical and structural rules that define or establish the composition of sentences, clauses, phrases, and words in any human language.

Unity. In writing, all the parts of a writing passage should be connected with another and therefore create unity among them. It means that the words, phrases and sentences have to be related to each other to get unity into the paragraphs. That is, the unity is a basic element that any kind of writing should contain, it is achieved with the aid of cohesion and coherence

because without these both elements it is imposible that a writing passage gets unity (Shiyab and Halimi, 2015). In addition to this information, these authors explain the function of cohesion and coherence to complete unity in a text, and say that cohesion helps to accomplish grammatical unity into writing, while coherence takes care whether or not that unity makes sense. For example: the sentence "the cat reads a book", "the dogs fly" are cohesive sentences because the grammatical structure is correct; however, they are not coherent sentences since they make no sense.

Above all, to achieve unity in a paragraph, the writers should discuss into a paragraph only one main idea from beginning to end. In this way, Lepionka (2008) expresses that the whole type of formal writing, for any audience at any educational level, must content the same basic elements of quality, which are clarity, cohesion, unity, coherence, and emphasis. On the other hand, if in a writing passage those type of aforementioned elements are not included, it is imposible that the readers understand the message that the writer wants to transmit.

Elements of writing

Good writing has several elements, some of them will be exposed below in order to identify their sequence, functions and importance into a writing project.

Topic sentences. According to Blampain (2006), the function of the topic sentences is to organize the paragraphs and contribute to make sense of complex arguments. The topic sentences are more relevant and necessary in analytical and argumentative writings than in descriptive or narrative ones. On the other hand, the same author argues that this type of sentences are important within a writing because they make a text easier to skim due to they are the base to write any argument. Moreover, Oshima and Hogue (2006) argue that the topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph, it limits to the topic to one specific area that can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph.

Supporting sentences. They are sentences that develop the topic sentence. That is, they explain or prove the topic sentence by given more information about it (Oshima and Hogue, 2006). Furthermore, it is important to mention that the supporting sentences carry out various functions within writing: they provide specific details to clarify the main ideas, contribute with important statement to the topic, support the topic and the controlling idea established in the topic sentence, and provide evidences and patterns to sustain the topic sentence.

Transition words. Transitions are words and phrases that provide a connection between ideas, sentences and paragraphs. Transitions help to make a piece of writing flow better, besides, they can transform disconnected pieces of ideas into a unified text (Bonk, 2015). Moreover the same author declares that the transition words (e.g., however, but, although, then, also, etc.) and transition phrases (e.g., on the other hand, in addition, in other words, etc.) are the tools that aid to the readers go from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph without losing the main idea exposed by the writer in a text. Therefore, this kind of linkages are required and utilized to foster cohesion, coherence and unity into a written text.

Punctuation. It is a system of signs or symbols that are used to aid the clarity and comprehension of the written language. The most common punctuation symbols consist of the following: period or full stop, colon, semicolon, comma, inverted commas or quotation marks, questions marks, exclamation mark, apostrophe, hyphen, brackets, and capital letters (Hillary, 2015). Thus, regarding the importance of punctuation in writing, Hillary states that well-placed punctuation signs can make a passage much easier to read and understand. However, this author also claims that punctuation is not everything in writing, because it is also necessary to apply good spelling, complex grammatical structures, and efficient content to transmit an effective message.

Spelling. It is an act or process of writing words in a correct way using a proper sequence or order of letters in the word. This term, spelling has been used as synonym of orthography for long time, but according to a previous research there is a slight difference between the orthography and spelling. In this way, Sebba (2012) states that orthography may be comprehend as the set of rules for writing properly the words, while spelling is the enforcement of those rules to write the words in a right way. In order to explain the difference between orthography and spelling, the author shows an example where are included both expressions, "I am spelling the words of this sentence according to the orthography of English using the Roman writing system".

Capitalization. It is the manner of using capital letters in writing or printing texts. A general rule about capitalization states that the proper nouns, key words in titles, the pronoun *I*, and beginnings of sentences have to be always capitalized (Benjamin, 2013). Moreover this author says that capitalization has been seen as simple grammatical structures of a language, which is one of the first writing conventions that every child learn at the elementary classes. Furthermore, this author argues that each individual learn to capitalize the names and the upper and lower case letters at the earliest level of schooling; however, that gross errors in capitalization are frequently committed by a great number of students in their first language (L1) and obviously in the second language (L2).

Grammar in EFL writing. Grammar structures make written content more readable. Indeed, it is not possible to communicate the ideas efficiently if the speaker or writer do not master the essential principles of grammar or syntax (Peck and Coyle, 2012). According to this author " the essencial skill in writing is the ability to generate a correct sentence, followed by another correct sentence, and so on. By correct sentence, we mean a sentence that follows the convention of Standar English in its puntuation, spelling and grammar" (p. 3).

Errors in EFL writing

Errors in writing are view as normal part of a foreign language learning process and, as soon as proficiency increases, the production of errors decreases in relative form. In general terms, producing good writing is a challenging task for all language learners and even for native speakers of the language (Cook and Bassetti, 2005). So, there are several errors that learners often commit in their writings, such as: grammatical errors, lexical errors, mechanical errors, and others.

In addition to this information, a previous research carried out by Al-Mahrooqi, Takur and Roscoe (2015) shows that the most common mistakes that students usually make within their wiritng projects are the syntactical errors which include omition or misuse of auxiliary verbs, such as "be" and "have", wrong word order, omition of subjects, verb- tense problems, troubles in agreement, gender and number, articles, and prepositions.

According to Granger and Leech (2013), another factor that causes problems to EFL learner to write correctly a passage is determined by the interference of mother tongue. The authors argue that the learners usually use their L1 knowledge and transmit it to the target language. That is why; the first language interference has been regarded as a main cause of persistent problems with L2 acquisition that affect the four skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing.

On the other hand, according to earlier studies, incorrect puntuation and the lack of punctuation are other predominant problems which have been found frequently in EFL learners´ written texts. In this way, Harmer (2013) explains that most of educated people judge the quality of writing passages not just on the content, grammar, vocabulary and handwriting but also on their use of punctuation. As well, the author claims that if capital letters, punctuation conventions, sentence and paragraph boundaries are not used correctly,

this cannot only make a negative impression, but it can also make a text difficult to understand.

Furthermore, Harmer gives suggestions to the English teachers and proposes that if teachers want their students to be successful in the writing skill, they need to teach them how to use punctuation conventions in the writing projects.

Additionally to this information, Pilar and Llach (2011) estimate that semantic confusion is another frequent error committed by EFL learners. It refers to the confusion of words, which means that some words are confused because they are semantically similar and also have similar meaning but they are functionally different. About this statement, the authors provide two examples gotten from students' written texts:

In the city are very shops (very instead of "many"),

My bedroom is great (great instead of "huge" or "big").

Likewise, the authors declare that the mistakes, which are classified under semantic intralingual errors include: difficulty to paraphrase, derivational errors, confusion of semantically similar words, collocation and subject / verbs tense.

Yagelski (2015) also determines another factor that cause problems to the EFL learners at the moment of performing a writing task. It is the lack of knowledge of the words or the problem to make a distinction between similar words, because there are some words that look and sound equal, but they have different meaning and functions. For example, the words "advice" and "advise" have similar sound and a similar spelling, only change the letters "c" and "s", but they are totally different in meaning; the first one is a noun and the second a verb.

According to Williams (2003), grammatical errors occur when people use function words in ways that English does not accept. The grammatical mistakes usually include problems to identify subject/verb agreement, prepositions and articles misuse; it may arise

from using an unacceptable preposition and article or omitting preposition and article where they are required.

In order to give more details about the causes and types of EFL writing errors, this current study has taken into consideration the information and results from six previous conducted around the world based on errors in EFL writing.

The first study considered in this paper was carried out by Ngangbam (2016). Its objective was to investigate the English syntactic errors that EFL learners commit in their writing tasks; being the sample for this study EFL student from an Arabic University. Findings show that grammar was the major difficult area in which some students were found having writing troubles. For example, some students wrote incomplete expressions and irrelevant sentences because of their lack of knowledge about the grammatical structures. Additionally, the problems in the use of prepositions such as omission or overuse of prepositions recorded a high level of occurrence too. The students also had difficulty with verb tense, subject – verb agreement, and punctuation where the most frequent problem was misuse or overuse of commas. Lastly, Ngangbam also describes other factor that drives learners to commit mistakes which are mother-tongue interference, misuse of phrasal verbs, lack of vocabulary, misuse of articles, concord, spelling mistakes and incorrect organization of ideas.

The second study regarded in this literature review had as objective to investigate what are the main errors that students produce in EFL writing. This investigation work was conducted by Musfata, Kirana and Bahri (2016) at a junior high school in Indonesia. And the technique used to collect the data was note-taking and writing tests. As a result, the author defines that the most common error found in this study was miss-selection mistakes. Here two examples taken from the students´ written texts:

Last weekend, I *gone* to a restaurant…

We went there *for* get fresh air but the weather.

In the first example, the student intended to write his/her past story. Therefore, it is clear that the verb *go* in this sentence must be in the past form *went*, not the past participle *gone*. In the second example, the students used the preposition *for* instead of the infinitive *to*.

Omissions were the second most common type of error committed by the students in their recount essays. To clarify this statement, the authors define that problems of omission are produced when essential elements such as primary verbs, articles, prepositions, punctuations are missed. However, another predominant error was the mistake in word forms; this means that some students used wrong parts of speech such as adjective forms when adverbs were required. Finally, the authors conclude that articles are also highly problematic elements of a language which affects to develop a good writing. For example, in the students´ written texts the learners often add an article when it is not necessary or omit articles when they are required, what is more, they often applied a definite article when an indefinite one should have been used and vice versa.

The third study carried out by Wu and Garza (2014) had as objective to investigate and identify the factors that interfere with the writing skills, which were analyzed through the variables: grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanics, and content. The results show that the majority of errors found in this study were related to grammar, and into this category the most frequent mistake was associated to the subject verb agreement that reached the 12%; the errors about construction of sentences and fragments also had a similar frequency of occurrence in the written passages, getting 11%. Finally, the errors about the use of singular/plural and omission of verbs were very numerous too that with a range of 7%. However, there were other errors classified as mistakes of minor impact which include wrong use of prepositions, misuse of articles, and wrong use of pronouns.

According to the authors, the majority of those mistakes were caused by the interference of the first language to the target language because the participants committed more mistakes on interlingual/transfer errors than on intralingual/developmental errors. However, in order to overcome those problems, Wu and Garza suggest teachers prepare material to use English in real-life cases. Namely, classroom activities should be performed in an environment with characteristics of a real- life setting, where students can use authentic audience and materials. Also, teachers could design genuine tasks in ways that align English language learning with students' needs and learning styles. On the other hand, the authentic material that can be included for the teaching and learning process can be newspapers, magazines, websites, and published reading materials that provide to the learners with new information to help them become better writers.

The fourth study carried out by Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013), which purpose was focused on analyzing writing errors caused by the interference of the first language (L1), regarding three writing genres: narration, description, and comparison/contrast. The findings determined that the L1 interference errors rounded 16 mistakes, in which include verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, modal/auxiliary, singular/plural form, fragment, verb form, pronoun, run-on sentence, infinitive/gerund, transition, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparison structure. Regarding the gender "narration", the most frequent errors found were verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, preposition, and modal/auxiliary, respectively; while the most frequent errors about description and comparison/contrast were article, sentence structure, word choice, singular/plural form, and subject-verb agreement, respectively.

The fifth study regarded in this paper, carried out by Kaweera (2013) in Thailand, had as objective to investigate and analyze the errors about interlingual interference of the mother

tongue (Thai) to the target language (English). The errors were analyzed based on three perceptions of interlingual interference: lexical, syntactic and discourse and seven intralingul factors: false analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rules, redundancy, restrictions, hipercorrection and overgeneralization.

The outcomes from this sudy revealed that most frequent writing error commited by EFL learners was the transference of L1 (Thai) sintactical rules to the target luaguage (English). Likewise, the author states that interlingual errors were the most frequent mistakes found in EFL learners´ written passages, and explains that this is because when the learners write in the target language, they rely on their native language structures to produce their writing tasks. But as each language has its own grammatical structures, punctuation convention, and other rules that govern them, so it is not advisable to use linguistic structures from the first language in the foreign language. For example, when learners use their cognitive language related to their L1 to write any kind of argument in target language some grammatical errors, lexical errors, syntactical errors appear immediately because all languages have their own structures which cannot be applied to another one.

To conclude, Kaweera gives some suggestions to the teachers and advise them that it is important put together proper didactic material about grammatical structures, use the inductive method, and encourage learners to read passages which content the structures that students need most to foster their language knowledge. It is advisable to use short lessons, instead of long lessons with a lot of grammar presentations to avoid that the student gets confused. The lessons should be always based on the students' needs, about complicated rules of the language, or untreatable errors selected from the students. Likewise, the students should be trained to work on their errors, they can work in pairs, in groups or in individual activities in which they get opportunities to notice their errors themselves or collaboratively.

The sixth study which was conducted by Shitu (2015) in Nigeria had as objective to identify the EFL writing errors, analyze their structural compositions, and find out if there are patterns to these kinds of errors. The findings of this study show that the first error that recorded the highest percentage was word choice; it means that the choice of one word or both words were erroneous. For example, in this study have been found the follow: "*Doing inspection*" instead of "*Conduct inspection*", "*I am full happy*" instead of "*I am very happy*". The second error found was word forms errors, these errors occur when the form of the word use is incorrect, e.g. *eat three meals,* in place of "*take three meal*"; *study deeply,* in place of "*study hard*".

Additionally to this information, another error detected in this study was the overgeneralization of rules, this means the overuse or overextension of morphological and grammatical structures, which produce incorrect combination of words and phrases. Word combination is produced by two words together, sometimes joined by a hyphen. But according to this study the students made this mistakes: "*every- body*" in place of "*everybody*", "*for ever*" in place of "*forever*".

The errors with relation to subject–verb agreement were also found as a frequent writing mistakes. For example: "*he play*" instead of "*he plays*".

Furthermore, the participants also presented difficulty in concordances, it means agreement in a sentence because a subject must agree with the adjectives in number and with verb in number, gender, and person. For example, the students had written "*various house*" in place of "*various houses*", "she *must goes*" in place of "*she must go*". "*Maria is a teacher. He work at a public school* instead of "*Maria is a teacher. She works at a public school*".

Lastly, students also have problems with *collocation*. In this case they had written "*I am in the school*" instead" of "*I am at the school*", "*Conclusively*" instead of "*In conclusion*".

According to the author, the native language influence is the main reason that causes some errors in EFL writing. It refers to mother tongue interference or direct translation of vocabulary and grammatical rules from the L1 to L2. Finally, Shitu gives some suggestions to the teachers in order to help students to overcome and minimize the errors within their writings. The author recommends that the English language teachers should encourage students to recognize what are their errors, and work effectively to correct them. Moreover, they should create a good environment where students have opportunity of putting their previous knowledge into practice, because when the foreign language learners have chance to practice the target language in a real life setting the errors are reduced rapidly.

Chapter II: Method

Setting and participants

This study was carried out in the city of Cuenca, and aims to identify the most frequent errors in EFL writing. To achieve this, 70 students and 5 teachers from second year senior public high schools were asked to participate in this study

The students chosen for this sample were sixty percent females and forty percent males aged between 16 and 18. However, the English level of the participants was not considered for this study.

Procedure

The first step to start this project was to collect the information required which facilitated the development of this investigation work. First of all, a specific set of items about writing was stated to be studied in this paper, in which were included: writing skills (definition, importance, and the writing process); coherence, cohesion, and unity in the writing; elements of writing (topic sentences, supporting sentences, transition words, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and grammar in English), and errors in EFL writing.

As well, useful data about previous studies done around the world about writing skills were considered as a way to support this current study. Those studies were useful to demonstrate the problems that students have to face when they write passages, and determine the types of writing errors that learners commit when writing in English.

This research was carried out by using a mixed method approach that involves both quantitative and qualitative procedures. The qualitative method was used to describe and examine the information and the passages written by the students, as well as, analyze the teachers and students' perceptions about the errors in the process of EFL writing. The quantitative research was used for numerical data, which evaluated the number of errors that students committed in their written paragraphs and the frequency of each one.

In order to gather the data, two public high schools were visited with the purpose of getting the authorization to carry out this study. Having the permission, three classrooms from second year senior high schools were selected to administer the student's questionnaires and writing test; being seventy the total number of students required to participate in this study, unfortunately only 54 students could take the writing test. Besides, five teachers from the same senior high schools were asked to participate in this study, who answered the questionnaire designed for them which focuses on obtaining the teachers´ point of view about their students´ writing errors.

The instruments applied in this study were students and teachers questionnaire, and a writing test.

The student questionnaire was composed of 12 questions which were designed to obtain the students perception about their errors in English writing, the questions were based on evaluate grammar, content, and mechanics.

In the writing test, the students were asked to write a paragraph about their favorite singer, in which the students were given 20 to 25 minutes to write the passage with a minimum word limit of 100 words and a maximum of 150 words.

The teacher questionnaire consisted of 12 questions aimed to get the opinion of the teachers about the writing errors that they frequently find in their students English writing tasks. All the questions were based on analyzing grammar, content, and mechanics.

When the entire students and teachers questionnaires and the writing tests doing by the students were completed, all the paragraphs were analyzed line by line in order to detect errors related to grammar, content, and mechanic. After that, the whole types of errors found in the paragraphs were organized in Excel tables to be described in a quantitative form. Furthermore, graphs were created in order to facilitate the identification of the most frequent

EFL writing error found in the students´ writing passages, and verify the respective percentage of each one.

In addition, as the current research has as target to identify and analyze the EFL writing errors produced by Ecuadorian students, the teachers and learners´ perception about those types of errors were examined and analyzed carefully to get the basic information about the writing problems that Ecuadorian students have to face when writing whatever kind of text in English. For this purpose, three variables have been considered to determine the type of error and the reasons that cause those writing errors in English. The first variable was "form of the language" in which were evaluated the types of error about grammar. The second one was about the "content" which was focused on studying the problems about cohesion, coherence and unity in a written text. And finally "mechanical" that was focused on analyzing the punctuation, spelling, and capitalization.

This study was an attempt to identify the factors that affect writing skills and their implication in writing performance. The most common EFL writing errors and the reason that cause them were described and analyzed by answering the following three questions: 1) which error has the highest percentage in each variable?, 2) which is the most frequent error in the students written texts?, 3) how do students and teachers perceive errors in EFL writing?

Chapter III: Results and Discussion

Description, Analysis, and Interpretation of Results

This section describes the results collected in the field research, carried out on two public high schools in the city of Cuenca. The analysis of the data was done regarding three variables: form of the language, content, and mechanical. In order to evaluate the form of the written language, various grammatical structures were selected to be explored: subjects, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, word order, and vocabulary. For the analysis of the content of the written passages, three statements were examined: topic sentences, supporting sentences, and transition words. Finally, to identify the mechanical errors in writings, there were three items nominated to be studied: punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. All the data were tabulated in tables and graphs in order to facilitate the description of results, which were analyzed in qualitative and quantitative form.

Form of the language: grammar

GRAPH 1
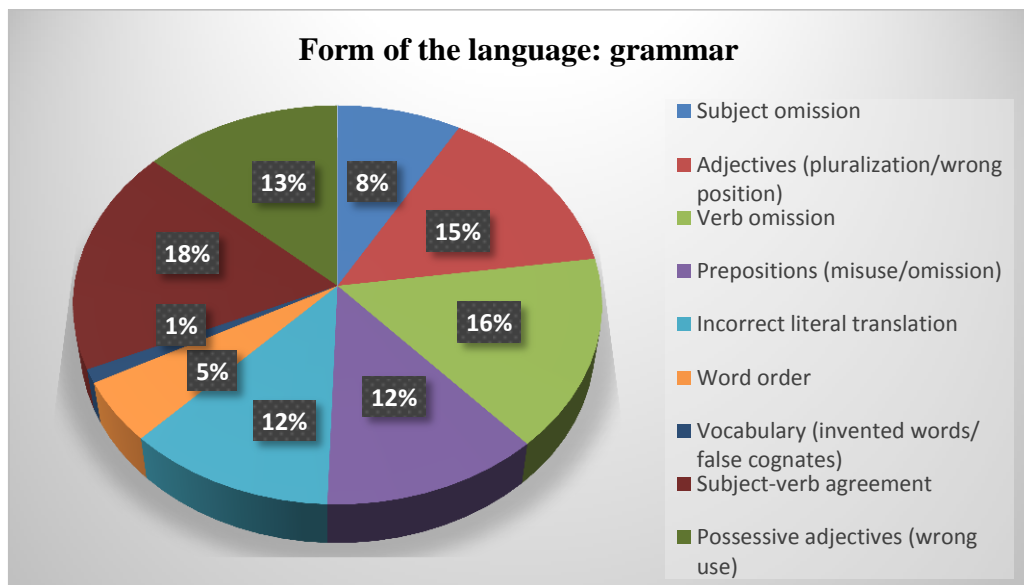
Author: Edwin Muñoz
Source: Students´ written texts

In linguistics, Grammar is so important due to it is the set of structures or rules that influences the composition of words, phrases, clauses and sentences in any language. Grammar is the system that helps us to understand how to combine the words, and all the linguistic components of a language to make any kind of writen texts more comprehensible. In consequence, it is impossible to communicate ideas or thoughts efficiently without mastering the essential principles of grammar. If the writer writes a text that contains grammatical errors, it is difficult to read and sometimes impossible to understand. Thus, to get a perfect writing, it is highly recommended to use grammatical rules correctly. A long the same lines of thinking, Peck and Coyle (2012) state that the sentences should be written correctly and followed by another correct sentence and so on to form a paragraph. Correct sentence means a sentence that contain grammatical structures properly.

Regarding the data specified in Graph 1, which was focused on identifying the types of errors about grammar, the participants showed most difficulty in the subject and verb agreement. *Subject-verb agreement error* takes up 18%. The verb in English always has to agree in number and time, however a great number of students present difficulty to conjugate the verbs. One of the examples found in the students´ written paragraphs were the following expressions:

 "Ricky *have*"

"My favorite songs *is*"

"He write the lyrics

In the three examples, all the words are morphologically correct, but the verbs do not agree with the subject which produce grammatical errors. In the first sample, the correct form would be "Ricky <u>has</u>. In the second one, *my favorite <u>song is</u>",* (singular) or *"my favorite <u>songs are</u>"* (plural). And, in the third clause the right form is *"He w<u>rites</u> the lyrics.*

According to the teachers there are three types of possible reasons why EFL learner make errors in subject and verb agreement: first, interference of their mother tongue; second, generalization of structures; and third, poor comprehension of the rules about subject verb-agreement.

The second error that marked a high percentage was *verb omission* with a rate of 16%. The following sentences were obtained from the students´ writing passages where we can observe this type of writing mistakes:

"They from Mexico"

"I have to attention to understand*"*

"He born in Ambato"

Analyzing the first sentence, the verb *to be was* omitted. Although it is possible identify the meaning of the sentence, it is not grammatically correct because the sentence does not contain verb. The correct form of this sentence would be "*they are from Mexico*".
In the second sample the verb *pay* was omitted*,* which interfere with the meaning and the comprehension of the sentence because it is not grammatically correct. Its correct structure is *"I have to pay attention to understand"*. In the third sentence, the spelling analysis shows that each words in this sentence is correct, however regarding the grammatical analysis it has inconsistencies because the verb *to be* was left out. The correct writing for this sentence is *"He was born in Ambato"*. This may be attributed to the interference of the L1 because in Spanish the verb *ser o estar (to be)* is not used in this context.

The omission of verbs interfere in the meaning of the sentences because the verb is the main element that gives sense to the sentences, so if the verbs are omitted the sentences lose their connotation. Findings from this study show that the verb "to be", and "have" were the most omitted verbs, especially when they have to be used as auxiliary verbs. The possible explanation to this problem, according to the students' report, is the lack of feedback that they

receive in terms of how to use two verbs in a same sentence, and especially, about the use of auxiliary verbs in sentences.

The third most frequent error according to this study was *pluralization and wrong position of adjectives*, it takes up 15%. This type of error can be observed in the following samples, which were gotten from the students´ written papers:

"His songs are populars"

"He sings songs romantics"

In the first examples, it is evident that the adjective is pluralized. This may be attributed to the influence of the first language because according to the Spanish grammatical rules the adjectives are pluralized when the nouns are in plural form, for example, "*sus canciones son populares*". For that reason, the students wrote "his songs are populars". According to the English grammar rules the adjectives are not pluralized, for example, "*popular*" is the correct spelling of this adjective.In the second sentence, it is evident two mistakes: word order and pluralization of the adjective. This error is also caused by the interference of the first language (Spanish) because the Spanish grammar rules determine that the adjective go after the noun, for example, noun + adjective "*canciones románticas*". On the other hand, the English grammar rules for the usage of adjectives state that the adjective go before the noun that it modifies, and the adjectives should not be pluralized, for example, *adjective + noun* "*romantic songs*". So the correct form of this sentence is *"He sings romantic songs"*.

Misuse of possessive adjectives was another predominant grammar error with a percentage of 13 %. The following examples taken from the students´ writing tasks, show errors related to this variable:

"I like Michael because your music is excellent

"They live with your parents"

Analyzing this samples, both sentences content a right grammatical structure (s + v + c), but show syntactic mistakes because the possessive adjective *your* is used instead of *his* and *their* respectively. In the first sentence the correct form would be "*I like Michael because his music is excellent*", and the second one "*They live with their parents*".

This problem does not interfere so much with the meaning of the sentences; but when various sentences with this type of error form a paragraph, it confuses the reader since the text is difficult to understand. The reason that may cause this error is the lack of syntactical knowledge to use possessive adjectives in English.

The fifth most frequent error was found in *misuse or omission of prepositions,* which reaches the 12%. The following examples were obtained from the students´ written paragraphs:

"19 of January of 1964"

"I listen his music in all day"

In the first example, the preposition *of* is used unnecessarily. It is evident that this error is caused by the interference of the L1 because in Spanish the date is written using the preposition "de", e. g. *19 de Enero de 1964;* while in English the structure to write dates is the following: *January 19th, 1964 or January 19, 1964 (USA), and 19th January 1964 or 19 January 1964 (UK).* The second example shows the omission of the preposition *to* after the verb, and the preposition *in* was used where it is not required. The morphological analysis indicates that every single morpheme is correct. The idea of the writer can be understood, however the sentence does not give an effective message because applying the grammatical rules this sentences has irregularities due to the preposition *to* should be always used after the verb listen, *e. g.* "*listen to*". In terms of the preposition *in*, it is a literal translation from L1 because in Spanish the preposition "*en*" is used in this context, e.g. "*en todo el día*", but in English to express that phrase it is not necessary to add the preposition *in,* for example. *"all*

day". As a result, the correct form of the second sample in English is *"I listen to his music all day".*

Additionally, the findings of this study show that the preposition *in, on, at of, to,* and *from*, were found as the most omitted or misused prepositions. This problem may be attributed to the lack of knowledge about the grammatical rules to use prepositions. Nevertheless, an effective tool to overcome the difficulty about the use of prepositions is to memorize different expressions in which preposition are applied separately. For example, *"focus on"*, *"interesting in"*, *"at home"* and so on.

The errors about *incorrect literal translation* were also very numerous with a rate of 12%. It means that the words from L1 are translated directly without considering the correct meaning in the target language. These mistakes can be observed in the following sentences, which were obtained from the students' writing samples:

"Today, they are singing in a band of Rock"

"This song speaks of the love of a lady"

In the first sentence, the mechanical analysis shows that the punctuation mark "comma" is used correctly, and grammatically, the sentence conveys meaning because it follows the structures "$S + v + c$". However, analyzing the content of the sentence, it does not transmit a clear message due to the substitution of the preposition *"in"* instead of *"on",* and the unnecessary use of the preposition *"of"*. This may be produced due to the interference of the students' mother tongue because the preposition "en" in Spanish is used to express that someone is involved in a project, for example, *"en una banda"* while in English the correct preposition would be *"on",* such as, *"on a band";* moreover the preposition *"de"* in Spanish is used to describe the characteristic of a noun, for instance, *"banda de Rock"* while in English it is not necessary to use any preposition to express the characteristics to a noun, because it can be used as adjective of another noun, for example, noun + noun *"Rock band"*.

The correct way to write that sentence would be the following: "*Currently, they sing on a Rock band*". In the second example, the grammatical analysis shows that the sentence has subject, verb, and complement, but it does not convey a clear message because the words are not written in the correct order, and the prepositions *of* are used unnecessary: the first "*of*" is used instead of "*about*", while the second "*of* " instead of the possessive "*´s*". The correct form of this sentence in English would be, "*This song speaks about a lady´s love*".

The possible explanation could be due to the EFL learners translated the words literally from their mother tongue (Spanish) to the target language (English), because they do not have enough knowledge about English language to create their own patterns of communication, and transmit their ideas effectively without using a translator program.

The seventh most common writing mistake found in this study was *subject omission* with a percentage of 8%. The following example was gotten from the students' written paragraphs:
"My favorite artist is very famous. Is singer and dancer."

In this example, the first sentence is semantically, morphologically and syntactically correct; but the second sentence, which is taking the function of supporting sentence is grammatically incorrect because the subject was omitted. The writer did not specify who he is talking about, whether his favorite singer is a lady or a man because in the supporting sentence the subject pronoun is missing. Regarding the grammatical rules, this expression could have been written, using the pronouns "*he* or *she*", which would state a characteristic of that famous person.

When a subject is omitted, the text is difficult to understand because it does not transmit a clear message and causes interference with the comprehension. This may be attributed to the lack of grammatical knowledge about the use of subjects in a sentence and the structures to form sentences.

Another error of writing found was *word order mistakes*, although they were not numerous, this type of error takes up 5%. The following examples were gathered from the students' written paragraphs:

"He is a singer traditional"

"He is the best artist Ecuatoriano"

By analyzing the first sentence, it could be seen that the sentence semantically transmit the right meaning. Furthermore, the original sentence is semantically and morphologically correct. But applying the English grammatical rules to the original sentence, it is evident that something is not correct; in English the adjective is placed before the noun that it modifies, for example, adjective + noun, "*traditional singer*". In the second example, the morphological analysis determines that every single morpheme is correct, except the last word which was written in the students' mother tongue. However, the grammar analysis shows that this sentence is incorrect because the adjective *Ecuadorian* was written in Spanish, e.g. *Ecuatoriano*, and used after the noun *artist*. This problem could occur due to the lack of linguistic knowledge in English and the first language interference. In English this sentence had to be written in this way, *"He is the best Ecuadorian artist"*.

Regarding the teachers opinion, the wrong order of the words in a sentence may be produced because of two reasons: the influence of the first language, or due to the students are not aware about the grammatical rules to write simple sentences, compound sentences, and complex sentences. Also, they argue that sometimes sentences and paragraphs in the students' written tasks are not easy to understand because the words are not ordered correctly, so the message is not comprehensive.

On the other hand, in this study, it was found that the students did not make many errors about *vocabulary (invented words/ false cognates)* in their writings. Only two (2) among fifty four (54) students committed this type of error, which was marked as the least

31

frequent error, with the lowest percentage (1%). Here an example found in the paragraphs written by the students:

"They sing balades"

The possible explanation to this writing problem is the influence of the first language, because in the L1 the above-mentioned word is written like this "*balada*", but as the English grammar rules state that to pluralize certain nouns the morpheme "*es*" should be added like suffix, probably for that reason the student changed the vowel "*a*" and used "*e*", inventing the word "*balades*"; however in English its correct spelling is, "*ballad*" in singular and "*ballads*" in plural.

Additionally, other types of errors were identified in this study which showed a lower level of incidence but affect so much in the writing performance. They are *omission or misuse use of articles,* and *misuse of object pronouns.* Within the texts written by the participants, it was possible identify various sentences affected by these type of error. For example:

*"*He is famous singer in Ecuador*"*

"<u>Him</u> music is nice"

"<u>Me</u> feel happy*"*

In the first sentence, the participant omitted the article "a", it could occur do to the interference of the L1 because in Spanish is possible omit the article "un" in that context, for example "*El es <u>un</u> cantante famoso en Ecuador* or *El es cantante famoso en Ecuador*", but in English the correct form of the sentence would be *"He is <u>a</u> famous singer in Ecuador"*. The second example shows grammar errors, the object pronoun *him* is used instead of the possessive adjective *his*, for example its correct form would be *"His music is nice"*.
In the third sample, the grammatical structure is incorrect because the object pronoun "*me*" is used instead of a subject pronoun *"I"*. In English the correct structure of this sentence would

be *"I feel happy".* The errors in the second and third sentence may be attributed to the lack of linguistic knowledge, and not to the influence of the L1.
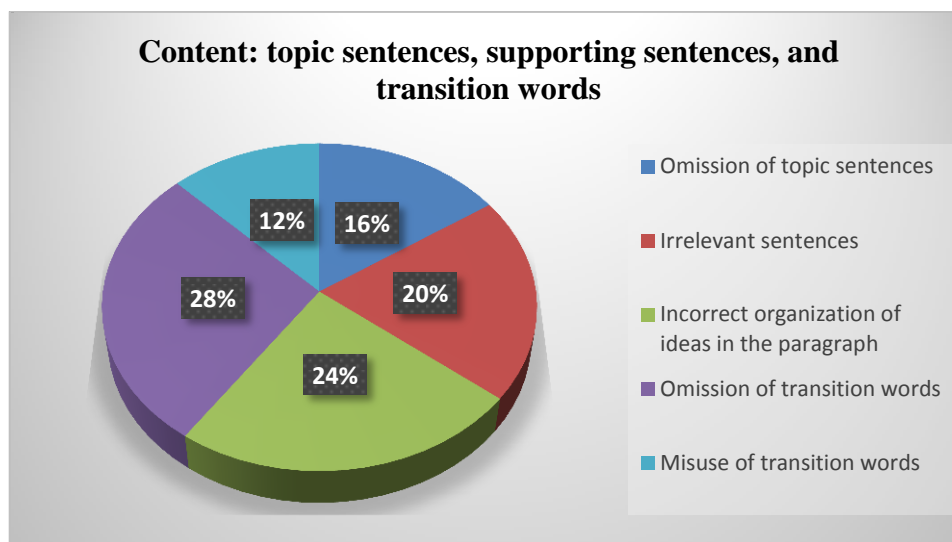
When the teachers were questioned about how often they find grammar errors in their students´ piece of writing, the majority of the teachers responded that "always" their students make grammatical mistakes; especially, adjectives (pluralization/ wrong position), misuse of prepositions, and incorrect literal translation. As well, teachers argue that learners produce grammatical errors due to they only learn the grammar as a set of rules, but do not put those memorized rules into practice in their writings. And in other cases, some teachers do not give feedback when their students make writing mistakes.

On the other hand, when students were asked about how frequent they find difficulty to use grammar structures when they write in English, they answered that they always commit grammar errors. In terms of grammar errors, the participants provided four possible reasons about why they commit this kind of mistakes: ignorance of complex grammatical structures, poor vocabulary, influence of their first language, and lack of conscious practice.

Regarding the importance of the grammar, a study carried out by Lenski and Verbruggen (2010) determines that if someone want to learn English as foreign language, he/she needs to memorize enough vocabulary and learn standard grammatical rules to speak and write efficiently in English. The grammatical structures are really important in writing because they make the written text more readable and easier to understand the main idea and the general message that the writer try to transmit.

Content: topic sentences, supporting sentences, and transition words

GRAPH 2

Content: topic sentences, supporting sentences, and transition words

- 16% Omission of topic sentences
- 20% Irrelevant sentences
- 24% Incorrect organization of ideas in the paragraph
- 28% Omission of transition words
- 12% Misuse of transition words

Author: Edwin Muñoz
Source: Students´ written texts

In writing, the most important part of a text is the content. The subjects or topics covered in a text form the content in a writing. Thus, in writing to convey a clear message, only one main idea should be discussed from beginning to end into the paragraph. Moreover, a written text must enclose three basic aspects: cohesion, coherence, and unity which facilitate the comprehension. And, to accomplish those three characteristics in a text, it has to contain topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences which are the framework to produce a text, as well as, the sentences need to be linked by transition words to form paragraphs. In this way, Lenski and Verbruggen (2010) claim that to complete a good written text, it should include grammatical structures, proper words to connect the sentences to form paragraphs, and the ideas have to be well-organized in a logical and consistent form. All this aspects help to give coherence, cohesion and unity to the written text.

According to the data shown in Graph 2, a total of one hundred and twenty nine (129) content errors were detected in fifty four paragraphs written by the students. The three

categories that recorded the highest percentage were *omission of transition words* with 28%, *incorrect organization of ideas in the paragraph* with 24%, and *irrelevant sentences* with 20%; on the other hand, the categories *omission of topic sentences* and *misuse of transition words* marked the lowest percentage 16% and 12% respectively.

Regarding the aforementioned results, *omission of transition words* shows the highest percentage, which determines that the majority of the students did not use transitions to join sentences into the paragraphs. For example, here a piece of a paragraph wrote by a student: "*Hanna is my favorite singer. She is beautiful. She is tall. She has short hair. She is thin. Her sister is Ashly. She has a long hair. Her hair is blond. They are friendly. I like the way they sing. They sing romantic songs*".

As it can be seen in this paragraph, each word is morphologically correct, and every single sentence is grammatically correct because they follow the grammar rules, e.g. S+ v + c. However, the main idea is not clearly expressed because the writer only made a list of sentences and did not use any transition word to connect the sentences and form a paragraph.

The transition words are so important in writing because they are a tool to associate a sentence to another sentence in order to form paragraphs, without changing the main idea in the text. According to the teachers' opinion, this problem may be attributed to the lack of knowledge about transition words and transition phrases, and how to use them to connect sentences into a paragraph.

The second most frequent error about content was the *incorrect organization of ideas in the paragraph*. This sample was obtained from the students' writing tasks: "*Jesse and Joy are my favorite singers. They sing ballads. I like ballads. Also, I love their songs. If, they come Ecuador. I will go to concert*".

In this piece of paragraph is evident the lack of coherence and cohesion because the ideas are disorganized and do not transmit an effective message. These ideas could have been

organized in the following way, *Jesse and Joy are my favorite singers. They sing ballads. If they come to Ecuador, I will go to their concert because I like that kind of music and love their songs.*

The possible explanation is the inference of the mother tongue because the learners think in their first language and translate literally those ideas to the foreign language. Therefore, they are not aware about the steps to create a paragraph, that is why, they encounter difficulty to organize their ideas in the paragraph.

The third error with a high level of occurrence found in this paper was *irrelevant sentences.* The following is an example, which was gathered from the students' written texts: "*My favorite singer is Juan F. Velasco. He is Ecuadorian. I am also Ecuadorian. In my opinion, he is the best Ecuadorian singer".*

Consequently in this mentioned sample, the sentence "*I am also Ecuadorian*" is out of place because the student is talking about himself and not about his favorite singer. Moreover, that set of sentences does not show cohesion and unity due to there is an irrelevant sentence among them. The irrelevant sentences always seem to be out of place, distract the reader, and interfere with the fluency of the message, and did not support the main idea of the paragraph rather they affect the quality of the text.

 Omission of topic sentences was the fourth most frequent error according to the results about content errors. For example, this is a piece of paragraph obtained from students' written paragraphs, which shows the interference of this variable:
"*He is an easy-going person. He has a nice voice and started to sing when he was very young. When I listen to his music, I feel happy. He is from Ambato (…). In conclusion, he is known as the most beloved".*

This piece of writing looks as a riddle and not as a paragraph. The grammatical analysis shows that the whole sentences are correctly structured, but the content of the

passage is poor because the topic sentence is missing, and nobody knows who the writer is talking about.

When in a paragraph the topic sentence is omitted, it does not transmit any effective message due to the passage does not have a line or a main idea to follow, causing misunderstandings to the readers. It may be attributed to the lack of experience to structure a paragraph or possibly the students are not aware about the techniques to write correctly.

On the other hand, *misuse of transition words* was the least frequent content error found in the students' written paragraphs. Although, this type of error recorded the lowest percentage in the graph, it was numerous; sixteen (16) among fifty four (54) students committed that error. The following is a fragment obtained from the students' written texts:

"My favorite singer is Tobias Sammet. He is from Germany. He sings and also writes lyrics. Also in 2006, he founded the rock band called Tobias Sammet". Also, he is working on a new project to help poor people. He is a hard working person, for that reason, he is my favorite singer".

In this example, the grammatical analysis shows that this paragraph is correct because all the sentences follow the grammar rules; and the mechanical analysis determine that the spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are correct. However, examining the content, it has irregularities because the same transition word "*also*" was used to connect the sentences, which cause lack of coherence and unity to the paragraph. It interferes with the comprehension because the misuse or overuse of transitions words confuses the reader and cause interference with the comprehension.
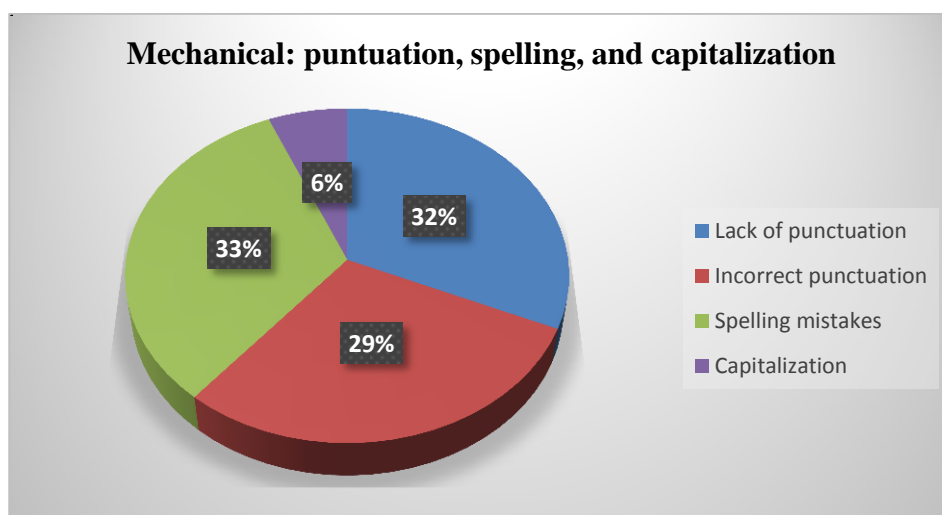
The possible explanation lies on two reasons: lack of vocabulary, and lack of practice to use the transition words in real writings. Some participants explained that the unique activities where they use transitions are only to complete activities in their workbooks, and they never are encouraged to write stories, essays or article using transitions, in the classroom.

When teachers were asked about how often they find content errors in their student's piece of writing, they answered that the students "*always*" produce types of errors in their writings because they find difficulty to structure a paragraph correctly, which should contain main idea, topic sentences, supporting sentences, and transition words to connect sentences. According to the teachers, the most frequent errors, committed by the EFL learners about this category, are the *incorrect organization of ideas in the paragraph*, and the *omission of transition words*.

In writing, the writer should folllow several rules to transmit a good message, and avoid misunderstandings to the reader. In this way, Lepionka (2008) explains that all type of formal writing, for any type of audience at any educational level, must content the same basic elements of quality, which are clarity, cohesion, unity, coherence, and emphasis.

Mechanical: punctuation, spelling, and capitalization

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GRAPH 3

</div>

Mechanical: puntuation, spelling, and capitalization

- Lack of punctuation: 32%
- Incorrect punctuation: 29%
- Spelling mistakes: 33%
- Capitalization: 6%

Author: Edwin Muñoz
Source: Students´ written texts

In linguistic, mechanics is a set of conventional rules that determine the mechanical aspects in the writings, which involves spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. These three

elements are essential to structure sentences and paragraphs correctly. They help to make a written text more readable to avoid misunderstandings.

In order to identify the type of mechanical errors and which of them has the highest percentage of occurrence in EFL writings, fifty four paragraphs written by EFL leaners were examined, and four mechanical errors were identified, analyzed, and described in this paper.

Graph 3 shows that the mechanical error which recorded the highest percentage was *spelling mistakes* with 33%, followed by *lack of punctuation* that marked a similar percentage 32%. *Incorrect punctuation* also has a high level of occurrence, taking up 29%. On the other hand, the mistakes related to *capitalization* recorded the lowest level of frequency, taking up 6%.

Regarding the above-mentioned outcomes, *spelling mistakes* was found as the most frequent mechanical error, it determines that a great number of EFL learners often omit or use wrong graphemes to form words. For instance, the students wrote the words,

"Oficial"

"United Estates"

"Childrens"

 In the first and second example it is evident the influence of the student's mother tongue because that phoneme in Spanish is written with a single "*f*" (oficial), while in English, it is spelled with double *f,* e.g. "*official*". In the second phrase the vowel "e" was unnecessarily added; it may be due to the L1 interference because that above-mentioned word in Spanish is written using first the vowel "E", e.g. "Estados", while in English the correct spelling is "*States"*.

The third example shows an incorrect pluralization of noun. In English there are some irregular nouns, which do not need to change their spelling to their plural form because they have their own singular and plural structure, e. g. "*child- children, man – men".* In Spanish

the grapheme *"s"* is utilized to form plurals so this spelling mistake may be attributed to the impact of the L1, but also to the lack of linguistic knowledge

Sometimes, the spelling mistakes do not interfere with comprehension, but affect the quality of the writing; especially, if this is an academic or formal essay, project, journal, letter, among others.

Lack of punctuation was another predominant error about mechanics. Examining the texts wrote by the students, 30 out of 54 paragraphs contained this type of error. The following sample was taken from a paragraph, which was written by a student:
"He sings romantic songs for example the song I will never stop loving you is very romantic".

Analyzing this fragment, each word has been spelled correctly, but does not transmit a clear message because of the lack of punctuation, it does not show neither cohesion nor coherence. Lack of punctuation, especially the omission of commas, periods, and question marks, interferes with comprehension because alter or change completely the meaning of the sentences. So, to convey a good message, this sentence could be written like the following, *"He sings romantic songs. For example, the song "I will never stop loving you" is very romantic.*

This problem could occur due to the deficiency of knowledge about the structures for compound sentences, because most of the teachers do not make emphasis on teaching punctuation conventions due to they are always focused on teaching simple sentences and vocabulary.

Incorrect punctuation was the third most frequent mechanical error found in this study. It shows that several students are not aware about the correct use of punctuation conventions. The following sentence was taken from the students' writing tasks, which shows the interference of this mistake:
"He has two children: that are July and Charlie"

Regarding this example, morphologically the sentence convey its meaning, but semantically, it does not transmit a clear message because it is hindered by the incorrect use of the punctuation. The colon is used to introduce a series of items; but in this case the writer did not have to make a list of items, he only needed to clarify the names of both children so a comma was required, e. g. *"He has two children, July and Charlie"*.

Misuse of punctuation is a writing problem that could lead to misunderstandings because when a punctuation mark is wrong used in a sentence or between sentences, it produces ambiguity. The possible explanation to this problem may be attributed to the lack of practice because most of the students reported that they never make writing activities related to the practice of the elements of punctuation in class. Other participants reported that they are not aware about the use of these elements neither in the L1 nor in L2. Besides, others did not even know the names of some punctuation signs. So for the learners, it is impossible to include a correct punctuation in their writing tasks.

Finally, among the four mechanical errors analyzed in this paper, *capitalization* was the least frequent error. Even though most of high school students are aware about the general capitalization rules, which states that the proper nouns, key words in titles, the pronoun *I*, and beginnings of sentences must be always capitalized, some participants committed capitalization mistakes in their writings. However, it was only a minimum number of students.

Capitalization mistakes may be produced due to the lack of practice or lack of concentration at the moment of writing because when students were asked about the use of capital letters, they demonstrated knowledge about capitalization rules.

Mechanical errors have been found as very common errors in EFL writings. Sometimes, this category of errors do not interfere with comprehension; nevertheless they can reflect negatively on the writer, exclusively in a formal/educational setting. Nonetheless in

other cases, mechanical errors can cause a negative impression in the writings, and also make a text difficult to understand.

When the English teachers were questioned about how frequent they found mechanical errors in their student´s piece of writings, they reported that "always and often" their pupils commit those errors; specially, lack of punctuation and spelling mistakes. According to the teachers, this type of errors may be produced due to the importance of elements of writing such as punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are not explained in foreign language classes.

Likewise, the students responded that they never make writing activities related to the practice of the above-mentioned mechanical elements in class. In addition, other participants expressed that they have problem to use correctly the punctuation conventions in their mother tongue writings. What is more, some students do not know neither the names of various punctuation signs nor the correct use of them, so they feel frustrated and depressed when they have to write a passage. As a consequence, it is difficult for EFL leaners to include a correct punctuation in their writings.

In terms of mechanics importance and mechanical elements in writings. Harmer (2013) explains that most of the people judge the quality of writing passages not just on the content, the language, and the writer´s handwriting, but also on their use of punctuation. The author expressed that if capital letters, commas, full stops, sentence and paragraph boundaries are not used correctly, this cannot only make a negative impression, but it can also make a text difficult to understand.

On the other hand, Harmer gives an advice to the EFL teachers and recommends that if teachers want their students to be effective and successful in the writing skill, they need to teach the correct use of punctuation marks and encourage students to participate in writing activities where the they have the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge acquired in class.

The most frequent error in the students´ written texts

GRAPH 4
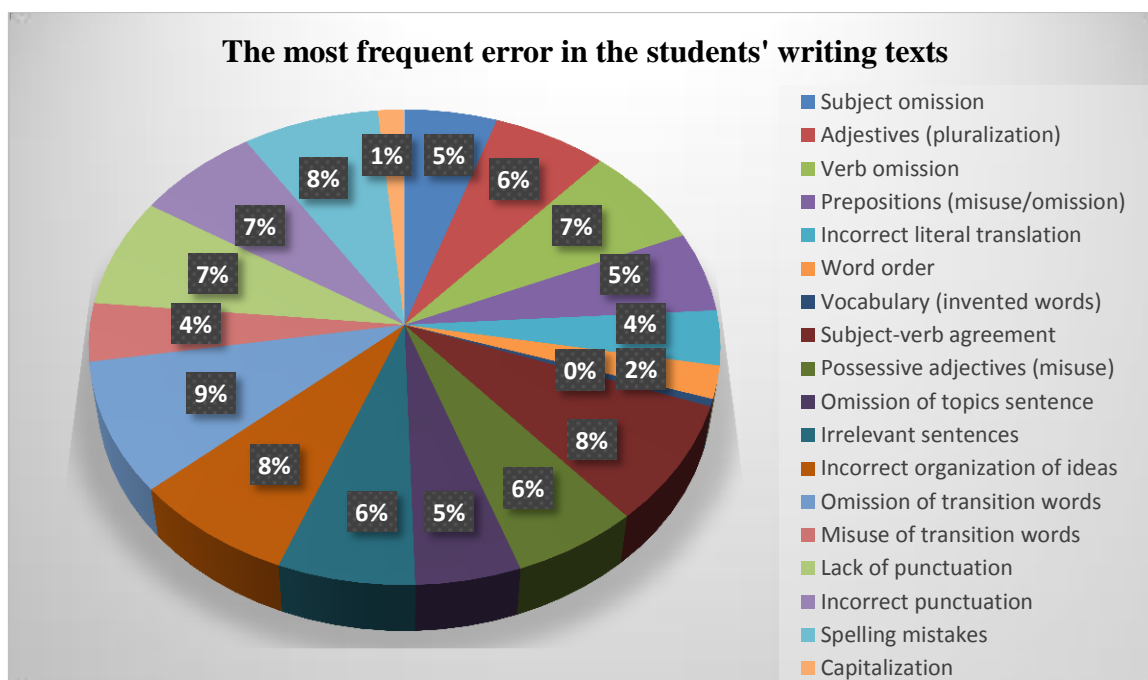
Author: Edwin Muñoz
Source: Students´ written texts

Based on the collected data, 18 categories of errors were analyzed. The students had the greatest difficulty in using transitions, being *omission of transition words* the error that recorded the highest percentage 9%. Likewise, the teachers who participated in the project agree with this outcomes and argue that this type of writing problem is one of the most common error that students commit in their writings, which could occur due to the lack of training, because learners rarely carry out writing activities to practice specially the use of transition words and phrases; consequently, students are not aware about the process to write paragraphs using transitions because they only used to write isolated sentences.

Regarding the students´ perception, this problem may be caused due to the fact that they are not aware about the use of transition words neither in their mother tongue (Spanish)

nor in the target language (English). So, students usually commit this type of mistakes in Spanish which affects to English because they translate their ideas literally.

On the other hand, after analyzing the causes and the consequences about wrong use or omission of transitions words, the findings show that it is not an isolated problem. It is an error that guides the writer to commit other errors because when the sentences are not linked correctly, they produce incorrect organization of ideas in the paragraph and inappropriate sentences too. As a matter of fact, it is important highlight that *incorrect organization of ideas* reaches the second place with 8%, followed by two other errors that marked the same percentage such as *subject-verb agreement* (8%), and *spelling mistakes* (8%) too.

On the subject of transition words or transition phrases, a previous research carried out by Bonk (2015) declares that the transition words (e.g., however, but, although, then, also, etc.) and transition phrases (e.g., on the other hand, in addition, in other words, etc.) are the tools that aid to the readers go from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph without losing the main idea exposed by the writer in a text. What is more, this kind of linkages are required and utilized to foster cohesion, coherence and unity into a written text.

Nevertheless, it is important emphasize that the quality of the students' written texts were affected by other errors which interfere greatly with the comprehension. Those errors were related to grammar, such as: *verb omission, misuse of preposition, adjective pluralization, and wrong use of possessive adjectives;* mechanical errors in which include *incorrect punctuation;* and errors of content: *omission of topic sentences,* and *misuse of transition words.* The possible explanation is the influence of the first language because a great number of students usually translate the words literally and apply the Spanish grammatical rules to English without considering that the grammar of both language are different.

For example, a preposition which is used in a Spanish context cannot be applied in the same context in English, e.g. (en - in) L1 "*yo estoy en casa", L2 "I am at home"* In addition, in Spanish the adjectives are pluralized when the nouns are in plural form, e. g. L1 "*dos libros grandes",* L2 *"two big books"*; in terms of spelling, some words in both languages sound a little similar, but in Spanish they are spelled with a single grapheme, e. g. "*oficial, posible, oposición"*, while in English these are spelled with double grapheme, *e. g. official, different, opposition*.

CONCLUSIONS

The results from this research show that most of EFL writing errors produced by the students were caused by the interference of the first language. And, the areas that were more affected by this interference were grammar and vocabulary.

A significant comparison among three variables (grammar, content, mechanical) was done, being the content errors that recorded the highest percentage of occurrence in the EFL writing tasks, which include omission of transition words, incorrect organization of ideas in a paragraph, and irrelevant sentences.

The variables about grammar errors point out that the most frequent errors about this category were subject-verb agreement, verb omission, adjective pluralization, incorrect word order, misuse of prepositions, and incorrect literal translation, which were probably caused by the interference of the L1 because students depend heavily on the Spanish grammar structures and take it as a base to write passages in English.

Related to mechanical errors, this study concluded that spelling mistakes and lack of punctuation were really numerous and interfere highly in EFL writing passages causing a negative influence on writing skill in the target language.

Even though the teachers were aware about the negative interference that cause L1 on L2, it was evident that there is a deficiency of strategies, and meaningful activities provided by teachers which help students to improve the writing skills. Thus, most common ways that learners use when writing in English is to think in Spanish and then translating into English making them to commit different mistakes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is advisable to prioritize the teaching and learning process based on methods and strategies that guide learners to create and write their own ideas utilizing the L2 such as listening to write or reading to write, and not only use the grammar translation method, which has been employed in EFL classes for decades.

As was noted in this study, several students had difficulty to write their paragraphs with a good content, so this study suggests the teachers to carry out writing-for-learning strategy, where the students have the opportunity to write not only isolated sentences, but also form paragraphs applying grammar, punctuation and content rules. That is, this includes not just appropriate language use, but also text construction, layout, style and effectiveness.

Another recommendation to improve the writing skills is motivating learners to be involved in writing-for-writing activities, where learners are free to write whatever kind of writing as in the real life. For example, e-mails, articles, blogs, letters, etc.

This study recommends the teachers paying more attention to teaching punctuation conventions because only a mark can change the meaning of the passage. Learning to use the punctuation rules correctly helps not only to improve writing skills, but also it aids to comprehend the written texts because a good reader should know why the writer used a comma instead of a period, colon instead of comma, brackets instead of quotation marks, and so on.

In order to encourage the learners to put more emphasis on improving their writing skills, it is recommended to give positive corrective feedback, and create interactive teaching and learning activities in and outside class, where students feel supported by their teacher and freedom to produce their own writing passages.

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ANNEXES

UNIVERSIDAD TÉCNICA PARTICULAR DE LOJA

La Universidad Católica de Loja

OPEN AND DISTANCE MODALITY

ENGLISH DEGREE

WRITING TEST

Género: **Femenino** (   )   **Masculino** (   )

OBJETIVO: Obtener información sobre el tipo de errores que se cometen en la escritura en inglés de un párrafo.

INSTRUCCIÓN: Escriba un párrafo sobre el tema: ''My favorite singer''

ESTRATEGIA: El párrafo debe contener un mínimo de 100 a 150 palabras en un tiempo de 20 a 25 minutos. Incluya la información necesaria para dar a conocer cuál es su cantante favorito, las razones, y las características de este/esta.

My favorite Singer

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

GRACIAS POR SU COLABORACIÓN

UNIVERSIDAD TÉCNICA PARTICULAR DE LOJA

La Universidad Católica de Loja

OPEN AND DISTANCE MODALITY

ENGLISH DEGREE

STUDENT'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Género: ( ) Masculino ( ) Femenino ( )

1. ¿Le gusta escribir en inglés?

Sí ( ) No ( )
¿Por qué?
_____
_____

2. ¿Considera importante aprender a escribir correctamente en inglés?

Sí ( ) No ( )
¿Por qué?
_____
_____

3. ¿Con qué frecuencia desarrolla Ud. actividades de escritura en inglés en el aula?
Siempre ( ) Frecuentemente ( )A veces ( ) Rara vez ( ) Nunca ( )

4. ¿Considera que su nivel de escribir en inglés es….?

Muy bueno ( ) Bueno ( ) Regular ( ) Malo ( )
¿Por qué?

_____
_____

5. ¿Cree que los errores que se cometen al escribir inciden para que los demás comprendan el mensaje de su texto escrito?
Sí ( ) No ( )
¿Por qué?

_____

_____

6. Cuando Ud. escribe sobre un tema nuevo ¿Aplica las correcciones que hizo su profesor en sus escritos anteriores?

Sí ( )   No ( )

¿Por qué?

_____

_____

7. Marque con una X la frecuencia con la que Ud. comete errores gramaticales cuando escribe en inglés:

TIPO DE ERROR	SIEMPRE	FRECUENTE MENTE	A VECES	RARA VEZ	NUNCA
GRAMATICALES (omisión de sujeto, pluralización de adjetivos, incorrecto uso u omisión de preposiciones, traducción incorrecta, palabras inventadas, etc.)					

8. Enumere del 1 al 6 las razones por las que Ud. comete errores de gramática cuando escribe en inglés? Siendo 1 la menos importante y 6 la más importante.

No se presentan actividades de escritura para aplicar los temas gramaticales del inglés aprendidos en clase.   ( )

Su profesor no señala los errores gramaticales que Ud. ha comete cuando escribe en inglés.   ( )

Su profesor no explica los errores gramaticales cometidos en su escrito.   ( )

Considera que la gramática no es importante para escribir correctamente en inglés ( )

Le resulta difícil aplicar la gramática inglesa cuando escribe sobre un tema.   ( )

Las explicaciones gramaticales de su profesor no son fáciles de comprender.   ( )

Otra (especifique): _____

9. Marque con una X la frecuencia con la que Ud. comete errores de contenido cuando escribe en inglés:

TIPO DE ERROR	SIEMPRE	FRECUENTE MENTE	A VECES	RARA VEZ	NUNCA
ERRORES DE CONTENIDO (Relacionados con: omisión de la oración principal, oración principal mal planteada, oraciones secundarias que no se relacionan con la oración principal, oraciones mal ordenadas, oraciones mal conectadas, oraciones sin conexión entre sí.)					

10. Enumere del 1 al 7 las razones por las que Ud. comete errores de contenido cuando escribe en inglés? Siendo 1 la menos importante y 7 la más importante.

Su profesor de inglés no explica sobre la función de la oración principal, oraciones secundarias, organización de ideas, conexión y secuencia de ideas en el proceso de escritura ( )

No hay práctica sobre el uso de los elementos mencionados durante las actividades de escritura en la clase de inglés. ( )

Son difíciles de aplicar los elementos de contenido al momento de escribir. ( )

Olvida aplicarlos cuando escribe sobre un tema. ( )

Son elementos que tampoco los aplica cuando escribe en español ( )

Usted considera que los errores de contenido (pregunta anterior) NO influyen para que su escrito este correctamente redactado. ( )

Su profesor no corrige este tipo de errores en su escrito. ( )

Otra (especifique): _____

11. Marque con una X la frecuencia con la que Ud. comete errores mecánicos cuando escribe en inglés:

TIPO DE ERROR	SIEMPRE	FRECUENTE MENTE	A VECES	RARA VEZ	NUNCA
ERRORES MECÁNICOS (relacionados con: el incorrecto uso u omisión de signos de puntuación, uso incorrecto de mayúsculas, palabras mal escritas)					

12. Enumere del 1 al 7 las razones por las que Ud. comete errores mecánicos cuando escribe en inglés? Siendo 1 la menos importante y 7 la más importante.

Su profesor no explica la importancia del uso de signos de puntuación, mayúsculas, palabras bien escritas, etc. en la redacción de un texto en inglés. ( )

No hay práctica sobre el uso de los elementos antes mencionados en la escritura de un texto en inglés ( )

Le resulta indiferente el uso o no de los elementos mencionados anteriormente. ( )

Son elementos que Ud. tampoco los aplica cuando escribe en español ( )

Olvida aplicarlos cuando escribe sobre un tema en inglés. ( )

Su profesor no corrige este tipo de errores en su escrito. ( )

Otra (especifique):_____

¡Gracias por su colaboración!

UNIVERSIDAD TÉCNICA PARTICULAR DE LOJA

La Universidad Católica de Loja

OPEN AND DISTANCE MODALITY

ENGLISH DEGREE

TEACHER'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear teacher,

The following information will only be used for academic/research purposes. Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible based on the following criteria.

Gender: Male   ( )   Female( )

1. In your opinion, do your students like to write in English?

    Yes ( )   No ( )

Why?
_____
_____

2. According to your opinion, is it important for your students to write in English accurately?

    Yes ( )   No ( )

Why?
_____
_____

3. How often do you ask your students to do writing activities in class?

Always ( )   Often ( )   Sometimes   ( )   Rarely ( )   Never   ( )

4. Which is your students' writing level?

Advanced   ( )   Intermediate ( )   Beginner   ( )

Why?
_____
_____

5. Do your students write a piece of writing based on the feedback that you have included in their previous writing tasks?

     Yes ( )   No ( )

Why?
_____
_____

6. Do you give feedback to your students when they make writing errors?

     Yes ( )   No ( )

Why?
_____
_____

7. How often do you find grammar errors in your students' piece of writing?

TYPE OF ERROR	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
GRAMMAR ERRORS (subject omission, adjectives: pluralization/ wrong position, verb omission, prepositions: misuse/ omission, incorrect literal translation, word order, vocabulary: invented words / false cognates, etc.)					

8. Number from 1 to 6 the causes why your students make grammar errors when they write in English. (1= the least important, 6= the most important).

Grammar contents are not explained in writing activities   ( )
You do not highlight your students' grammar errors in their piece of writing   ( )
You do not include feedback in your students' writing activities   ( )
Grammar is not considered by your students as an important element to write accurately   ( )
Learning grammar is difficult for your students   ( )
Your students do not understand your grammar explanation   ( )
Others (Which one?): _____

9. How often do you find content errors in your students' piece of writing?

TYPE OF ERROR	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
CONTENT ERRORS: Omission of topic sentence, irrelevant sentences, incorrect organization of ideas in the paragraph, omission of transitions words, misuse of transitions words					

10. Number from 1 to 7 the causes why your students make content errors when they write in English. (1= the least important, 7= the most important).

The concept and role of elements in writing such as topic sentence, supporting sentences, organization of ideas, and use of transition words are not explained in class.   ( )
There is not any writing activity, related to the practice of the aforementioned elements, to do in class.   ( )
It is difficult for your students to identify and include these elements in a paragraph.   ( )
Your students forget to include these elements when they write.   ( )
These elements are not important for your students neither in Spanish nor in English   ( )
The correct uses of these elements do not have any impact on the development of their writing skill.   ( )
You do not highlight or correct these type of errors in your students' piece of writing.   ( )
Others (Which one?): _____

11. How often do you find mechanical errors in your students' piece of writing?

TYPE OF ERROR	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
MECHANICAL ERRORS: Lack of punctuation, Incorrect punctuation, Spelling mistakes, Capitalization					

12. Number from 1 to 7 the causes why your students make mechanical errors when they write in English. (1= the least important, 7= the most important).
The importance of elements in writing such as punctuation, capital letters, and spelling is not explained in class.   ( )
There is not any writing activity related to the practice of the aforementioned elements in class ( )
The use of these elements is not important for your students when they write.   ( )
These elements are not important for your students neither in Spanish nor in English   ( )
It is difficult for your students to include these elements in a paragraph.   ( )
Your students forget to include these elements when they write.   ( )
You do not highlight or correct this type of error in your students' piece of writing.   ( )
Others (Which one?): _____

THANK YOU!