Mother tongue interference in the acquisition of grammatical gender by Spanish learners of English

La interferencia de la lengua materana en la adquisición del género gramatical por aprendices españolas de inglés.

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Abstract

This study focuses on the acquisition of grammatical gender agreement at different levels of language proficiency in English, paying attention to syntactic constraints and those arising from the influence of the mother tongue. Thus, the objectives are, first, to categorise mismatches in English grammatical gender acquisition when learnt by Spaniards at A2, B1, B2 and C1 levels of proficiency established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018). Second, the study aims to determine whether these mismatches are produced by syntactic failure or by mother tongue transfer. Additionally, it explores whether communicative competence may be affected by grammatical gender acquisition mismatches. In this paper, the failures in grammatical gender agreement were identified and classified into syntactic and mother tongue transfer. The methodology followed was based on a corpus-driven approach. First,

a corpus of essays written by Spanish learners of English with A2, B1, B2 and C1 language proficiency levels was compiled. The grammatical gender agreement mismatches were then identified to ascertain the students' ability to assign gender in English. Finally, the frequencies of failure of grammatical gender agreement at the different levels of language proficiency were classified into syntactic and language transfer categories. The results showed not only the grammatical gender agreement mechanisms when acquiring English at the different levels of language proficiency but also which kind of components in communicative competence may be affected by gender agreement processes.

Keywords: grammatical gender agreement, language proficiency, Spanish learners, English.

Resumen

Este estudio se centra en la adquisición de la concordancia de género gramatical en distintos niveles de competencia lingüística en inglés, analizando las restricciones sintácticas y las derivadas de la influencia de la lengua materna. Así, los objetivos son, en primer lugar, categorizar los desajustes en la adquisición del género gramatical en inglés aprendido por españoles en los niveles A2, B1, B2 y C1 establecidos por el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (Consejo de Europa, 2001; 2018). En segundo lugar, el estudio desea comprobar si los desajustes se producen por fallos sintácticos o por transferencia de la lengua materna. Finalmente, explora si la competencia comunicativa puede verse afectada por los desajustes en la adquisición del género gramatical. En este trabajo se identificaron los errores en la concordancia gramatical de género y se clasificaron en sintácticos y de transferencia de la lengua materna. La metodología seguida se basó en un enfoque basado en corpus. En primer lugar, se recopiló un corpus de ensayos escritos por estudiantes españoles de inglés con niveles de competencia lingüística A2, B1, B2 y C1. A continuación, se identificaron los fallos

de concordancia gramatical de género para determinar la capacidad de los estudiantes para asignar el género en inglés. Por último, las frecuencias de fallo en la concordancia gramatical de género en los distintos niveles de competencia lingüística se clasificaron en categorías sintácticas y de transferencia lingüística. Los resultados mostraron no solo los mecanismos de concordancia gramatical de género en la adquisición del inglés en los distintos niveles de competencia lingüística, sino también qué tipo de componentes de la competencia comunicativa pueden verse afectados por los procesos de concordancia de género.

Palabras clave: concordancia gramatical de género, competencia lingüística, estudiantes españoles, inglés.

1. Introduction

Most studies on language acquisition focus on the analysis of lexical gender of languages such as French and Spanish, which clearly differentiate whether the gender of a noun is motivated by biological gender, so that, in Spanish for example, *mujer* is feminine and *hombre* is masculine (Corbett, 1991). Some other studies also pay attention to the acquisition of grammatical gender, that is, when there are arbitrary words, without any semantic motivation, in which there is no reason for *nevera* and *mesa*, for example, to be feminine rather than masculine (Franceschina, 2001; White et al., 2004).

Most languages therefore exhibit lexical and grammatical gender but, specifically, English has a semantic gender system determined by the meaning of the noun in context and does not differentiate grammatical gender in inanimate nouns such as *fridge* or *table*. In this vein, it may seem easy for native Spanish speakers to learn English as a foreign language to acquire gender, as there are no gender differences when definite and indefinite articles or determiners are used. However, this is not the case for pronouns or

possessive adjectives. Hence, in some cases, Spanish learners of English transfer the gender used in their mother tongue to English inanimate nouns. The Spanish gender system does not have a direct equivalent to the English pronoun *it* and the possessive adjective *its* to refer to inanimate nouns and animals. Spanish uses neutral pronouns to refer to inanimate nouns (e.g. tráeme eso [la nevera]), whose meaning is determined in context, but in general inanimate nouns are referred to as feminine or masculine (e.g. *tráemela [la nevera]*). Thus, when learning a foreign language that does not follow the same gender agreement 'rules' as Spanish, some errors derived from grammatical gender mismatches may arise.

Grammatical gender poses a serious problem to novice learners as well as to proficient speakers of a foreign language. This fact may affect learners' communicative competence in components such as linguistic competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, actional competence and discourse competence (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995) and language teachers should be aware of these language failures. Researchers should pay more attention to these aspects, as the cases of grammatical gender acquisition of Spanish and French by learners with different gender systems (Audring, 2008), by bilinguals (Alarcón, 2011) or the comparison of native and non-native speakers (Liceras et al., 2000; Franceschina, 2001) have already been extensively studied. But some grammatical gender problems may be encountered by learners of other foreign languages that also need to be studied and discussed.

Thus, in this paper, the first objective is to categorise mismatches in English grammatical gender acquisition when learnt by Spaniards at certain levels of language acquisition established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001, 2018), i.e. A2, B1, B2 and C1. The second is to check whether mismatches are produced by mother tongue transfer. Additionally, it explores whether the components of communicative competence, that is, linguistic competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, actional competence, and discourse competence, may be

affected by gender failures produced by Spanish learners of English. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed in this study:

1. Does the mother tongue influence the way speakers of a language with grammatical gender agreement acquire a language with a poorer grammatical gender system?

2. Are there any differences in the use of grammatical gender at different levels of foreign language proficiency?

3. Which components of communicative competence should be considered by English teachers to eliminate mismatches in grammatical gender agreement?

To answer these research questions and meet the objectives set, this paper has been organised in the following way. First, the introduction gives a general outline of the analysis and describes the most important aims of the paper in the objectives and research questions; second, the theoretical background is addressed in the following section about gender acquisition. The material and method section is then described in the third section. In the fourth section, the results are shown and discussed and, finally, conclusions are drawn.

2. Gender acquisition: Grammatical gender agreement

Studies on foreign language acquisition have traditionally paid attention to the different problems encountered by learners and have proposed solutions to improve foreign language learning (Corder, 1967; Edge, 1989; Ellis, 1997; James, 1998). But before suggesting solutions, researchers should be aware of the problems faced by foreign language learners. Many of the problems learners come across are related to gender assignment when the target language attributes feminine and masculine gender to nouns (Corbett, 1991). In this sense, gender assignment rules in a language

are proposed to decrease the burden of learning and memorising the gender of nouns and to help assign a gender to new words (Audring, 2008). But the most problematic case of gender acquisition is gender agreement. Determiners, pronouns and adjectives must therefore be marked for the same gender as the noun they are associated with. This is part of the functional nature of determiners and adjectives and their relationship with nouns in order to organise discourse in a logical and effective way.

Although the focus of this study is related to the acquisition of grammatical gender agreement in English, first it is also necessary to understand the mechanisms of grammatical gender agreement in Spanish to identify the way Spanish learners of English apply these rules when acquiring a foreign language. Spanish learners of English sometimes transfer the characteristics of their mother tongue onto the target language. So, in this section attention is paid to the studies that have focused on the problems of gender agreement when learning Spanish, which are taken into consideration to discuss the findings of this research.

While biological and semantic criteria are prevalent in lexical gender agreement, that is, feminine gender is assigned to women and masculine to men, the problems arise in grammatical gender agreement when learners try to retain and assimilate the gender of inanimate nouns in languages, such as Spanish, that do not follow any logical process or semantic criteria. That is, nouns are assigned to gender as a part of their form.

In Spanish, nouns have gender while adjectives, pronouns and determiners show gender agreement with the noun. As Grüter et al. (2012) explained, referring to the assignment of gender to Spanish nouns: "In many cases, morpho-phonological properties of the noun can provide a cue to its gender, with nouns ending in –*o* overwhelmingly belonging to the masculine, and those ending in –*a* to the feminine class" (p. 192). Besides, they mention that this rule is not fully reliable, that is, the assignment of gender to inanimate

nouns in Spanish seems to be complex and difficult to understand by those learning Spanish due to the existence of many exceptions. In this vein, they indicated that "The only consistent and fully reliable cue to a noun gender class is distributional, consisting of its co-occurrence relations with transparently gender-marked modifiers" (p. 192). In contrast, Harris (1991) considered that, in inanimate nouns, *–o* and *–a* endings are word markers rather than gender markers in Spanish, as these endings may be found in other words, such as adverbs, in which gender is not present. Canonical *–o* masculine endings and *–a* feminine endings form the 'inner core' or most prototypical cases, while nouns ending in *–e* or a consonant conform the non-canonical or 'outer core' and masculine nouns ending in *–a* and feminine in *–o* are exceptions, also called 'residue' (Montrul et al., 2008). After these reflections, it thus seems that the semantic classification of grammatical gender in inanimate nouns is idiosyncratic and complex in Spanish, and its complexity is disambiguated by the syntax (Ambadiang, 1999).

Alternatively, in English, gender is based on a pronominal gender system, that is, it has three genders, feminine, masculine and neuter, marked by the personal pronouns, 'he' and 'she' for male and female human antecedents, and 'it' for all inanimate nouns and animals (Frenck-Mestreet al., 2009). The main difference between English and Spanish is that the former has a semantic gender system, gender being interpreted depending on context and showing a strong tendency to use plural forms to neutralise it. For example, the European Parliament (2018) recommends the use of "officials" instead of "the official" (more examples can be found at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf). Moreover, English depends on word order rather than agreement to organise discourse and to show syntactic functions. One characteristic of gender agreement, present in Spanish but not in English, is the availability of noun drop or nominal ellipsis (Liceras et al., 2000). As Montrul et al. (2008) explained, "Spanish nouns can be dropped or omitted in discourse because the referent is recovered from the rich

gender and number agreement on the determiner" (p. 510-11), as, for example in the expression *la violeta*, where the implicit meaning in one specific context would be *the violet jacket*.

Thus, the fact that Spanish has a well-identified gender system for inanimate nouns, which is arbitrary and frequently distinct from natural gender while English has no grammatical gender, could create difficulties for Spanish learners of English. They may find it easier to use the grammatical gender reference of their mother tongue, that is, *puerta* is feminine and it should be the same in another language. Hence, acquiring English gender entails learning that there is no classification of inanimate nouns into feminine and masculine and that they are 'neutralised', thereby making it unnecessary for them to agree with pronouns, adjectives and determiners and to recognise agreement in nominal ellipsis. This fact seems to simplify foreign language acquisition processes, but it is an aspect that is questioned and studied in this paper.

The difficulties of foreign language learners regarding gender could have different sources (Grüter et al., 2012), such as learners not knowing a word and not knowing its gender (lexical knowledge) or their failure to fully understand gender agreement (syntactic knowledge) or not being able to reproduce lexical and syntactic knowledge in a very specific context. Additionally, some researchers have pointed out that grammatical gender agreement is not difficult to acquire when learners are instructed correctly (McCarthy, 2008; Alarcon, 2011) and that the mistakes that may arise could be due to specific problems mainly in spoken production, when speakers have to process grammatical gender in real time and thus errors or mismatches are more frequent.

In this vein, Sabourin et al. (2006) paid attention to transfer effects in learning a second language and indicated that "some L2 constructions are learnable while others seem not to be. This apparently depends partly on the structure of the L1 since it seems that transfer from the L1 can help in L2 acquisition in some cases. An example of an L2 phenomenon that is particularly difficult to learn

is grammatical gender" (p. 2). Sagarra and Herschensohn (2010) also agreed with the idea that grammatical gender is difficult to acquire due to language transfer. Most studies on gender agreement have paid attention to the way speakers of languages that do not have grammatical gender acquire it. But in this paper, I believe that grammatical gender is also difficult to acquire by learners whose mother tongue does have grammatical gender. Thus, the focus of this research is on the influence of Spanish transfer when acquiring gender in English, given that English has natural gender (determiners, pronouns and adjectives do not show grammatical gender agreement with the noun, the gender is shown through its meaning) while Spanish does have such agreement.

Sabourin et al. (2006) proposed three degrees of transfer in the target language, that is, no transfer, partial transfer and full transfer. In the present study, only full transfer was considered given the corpus and the fact that English only has gender agreements in pronouns and possessive adjectives and pronouns, which are the items studied here. Franceschina (2001) observed that learners whose mother tongue has gender agreement performed better than those whose mother tongue does not, but the dissimilarities among languages make it difficult to be certain that the concept of gender can be transferred from one language to another.

The question at the heart of most studies on L2 gender acquisition is therefore whether abstract properties of grammatical gender need to be present in the mother tongue for late learners to fully acquire grammatical gender and gender concord in a foreign language (Frenck-Mestreet al., 2009). This paper deals with empirical problems regarding gender agreement on pronouns and possessive adjective and pronouns, with the help of writing performed by Spanish learners of English. Even though English gender is not complicated to acquire, I would like to make a point in some cases in which English pronouns, possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns do not match their antecedents in the gender system when used by Spanish learners. Additionally, this paper explores language proficiency associated with

gender, that is, whether lower proficiency learners show the same native-like patterns as those with a higher level of proficiency.

Finally, I believe that, having observed the difficulties that may be encountered in grammatical gender agreement, there are some components included in communicative competence that should be considered by language teachers. Following Celce-Murcia et al.'s (1995) approach, these are: linguistic competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, actional competence, and discourse competence. These components should be considered by English teachers to assess the grammatical gender mismatches that may be spotted in early stages of language acquisition. Communication is the main aim of foreign language learners, and improving communicative competence should be one crucial aspect in foreign language teaching.

Competence here is understood as a state or product, not a process, distinct from proficiency, which is a process with dynamic implications (Taylor, 1988). Figure 1 shows the components proposed by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995, p. 10) and based on Canale and Swain's (1980) construct, which form part of communicative competence:

Figure 1. Components of communicative competence
(Celce-Murcia et al., 1995, p. 10)

The authors (1995) explained their proposal in the following way:

> our construct places the discourse component in a position where the lexico-grammatical building blocks, the actional organizing skills of communicative intent, and the sociocultural context come together and shape the discourse, which, in turn, also shapes each of the other three components. The circle surrounding the pyramid represents strategic competence, an ever-present, potentially usable inventory of skills. (p. 9)

I have chosen this proposal as it includes several components that embrace most communicative aspects to be considered by foreign language learners as well as by foreign language teachers. Bachman and Palmer (1996) also proposed communicative components divided into language knowledge and metacognitive strategies. At the same time, there are several sub-categories – language knowledge is divided into organisational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. This proposal is based on a functional approach to communication, and most of the sub-categories are related to language context and interpretation, so I preferred to use Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) proposal.

Grammatical gender agreement may be included in some of these five components of communicative competence, and it is necessary to identify the matching of these components with grammatical gender agreement to provide some didactic cues that may help language teachers. To fully understand the proposal, the different components and sub-components are described below. I refer to the different categories of communicative competence as components, although the authors described them as competencies. I think this may confound readers, so I have renamed them as components and used the term sub-components to talk about the different sub-classes in each component established by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995).

The discourse component includes the linguistic aspects incorporated by the writer to provide coherence and cohesion to a

text, thereby conforming discourse. It is divided into the following sub-components: cohesion, coherence, deixis, genre structure and conversational structure. Personal pronouns are included in deixis while reference (anaphora and anaphora) is classified in cohesion, aspects that are related to grammatical gender agreement.

The linguistic component comprises the basic elements whose aim is to achieve communication in a given language, that is, linking devices, sentence structures, etc. This component is sub-divided into the following sub-components: syntax, lexicon, morphology, phonology and orthography. In the sub-component of lexicon, words include function words, which include pronouns and these are related to grammatical gender agreement.

The actional component is defined as the aspect that matches actional intent with linguistic form. Actional intent means interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993) if we consider oral language and rhetorical moves and routines (Swales, 1990). This component is devoted to the knowledge of language functions and knowledge of sets of speech acts. It is divided into interpersonal exchange, information, opinions, feelings, suasions, problems and future scenarios.

The sociocultural component refers to the speaker's knowledge of how to express messages appropriately considering a sociocultural context. Target language instruction should include this component as foreign language learners should be proficient in communicating if they consider the sociocultural aspects. It is divided into the following factors: social contextual, stylistic appropriateness, cultural and non-verbal communicative.

Finally, the strategic component could be defined as knowledge of communication strategies and their use. It is divided into the following strategies: avoidance or reduction, achievement or compensatory, stalling or time-gaining, self-monitoring and interactional. Achievement and compensatory strategies include literal translation from the mother tongue, foreignising, e.g. a mother tongue word with target language pronunciation and

codeswitching to mother tongue or third foreign language, which could be related to grammatical gender agreement.

All the components of communicative competence should be considered by language learners and teachers, as it is important to identify failures in foreign language acquisition, but these failures should also be connected to the ultimate purpose of foreign language acquisition, that is, the ability to communicate. I agree with Celce-Murcia et al. (1995), who stated that "our aim therefore has been to organize the knowledge available about language use in a way that is consumable for classroom practice" (p. 29).

In this paper, I focus on grammatical gender agreement, considering those cases in which the influence of the mother tongue plays an important role. Although most studies have focused on foreign language learners whose mother tongue does not have grammatical gender agreement and researchers try to envisage how learners can acquire gender agreement in the target language (Harris, 1991; Oliphant, 1998; Dewaele and Véronique, 2001; Montrul et al., 2008; Grüter et al., 2012), here I analyse the opposite phenomenon, the acquisition of grammatical gender agreement by learners whose mother tongue includes grammatical gender (i.e. Spanish) and who are learning a foreign language that does not exhibit grammatical gender (i.e. English). Additionally, apart from analysing the syntactic characteristics of gender agreement by Spanish learners of English, I also focus on the influence of the learners' mother tongue and whether there are any differences between dissimilar proficiency levels.

3. Corpus and method

3.1. Corpus

A pool of 200 university students participated in this study. They were all enrolled in English subjects in engineering degree courses

at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) and needed to prove that they had at least a B2 (intermediate) (CEFRL 2001) level of proficiency in a foreign language before finishing their degree. To certify their foreign language proficiency, students had to pass a B2 proficiency level subject taught at the university or obtain a certificate from a body recognised by the Department of Applied Linguistics at the UPV. To help students obtain this B2 level, an assessment exam composed of the *Oxford Placement Test* and a written task was carried out by learners to identify their English proficiency level and they were given advice, if needed, on how they could improve their level of English to obtain the compulsory B2 level.

The corpus analysed in this study was compiled from 2016 to 2019 and it was composed of the writing tasks performed by learners of English whose English proficiency levels were A2, B1, B2 and C1. The exams had several parts, one of which was to write an essay to know the proficiency level of engineering students who had finished their secondary education and were enrolled to start their university education. The language levels of students were dissimilar as, although English is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary education in Spain, the proficiency levels of university students vary depending on their social and educational backgrounds. Most of the students obtain B1 or B2 levels, and this is the reason why more than one year was included in the corpus.

The length of each essay was from 230 to 350 words depending on the level, that is, the lower the level, the shorter the essay. They were time constrained. Students had to write their opinion about a topic explained in the exam and they were allotted 30 minutes to write the essay. The topics included in the corpus were immigration, the role of social media, globalisation, the internet and the effect of pollution on the environment.

Additionally, students had to answer a questionnaire about their knowledge of other languages. Only learners of English with a

knowledge of Spanish and Catalan were included in the study, since they are both romance languages with a grammatical gender agreement system and official languages in the Valencian Community region (Spain). The participants were between 19 and 24 years of age. Most of the learners who participated in the study were males, given that there is a higher percentage of males in engineering degrees taught at the university.

The total number of tokens and essays compiled for the analysis can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Data compiled for the analysis

Levels of language proficiency	Number of essays	Number of tokens	Average number of words per essay
A2 proficiency level	50	11,843	236.86
B1 proficiency level	50	14,327	286.54
B2 proficiency level	50	15,681	313.62
C1 proficiency level	50	16,885	337.70
Total	200	58,736	-

As can be seen, the number of tokens compiled in the four sub-corpora corresponding to A2, B1, B2 and C1 proficiency levels is in tune with the level, so that the higher the proficiency level is, the higher the number of tokens will be. The corpus was converted to text format to be analysed manually as well as mechanically.

3.2. Procedure

Once the corpus had been compiled, it was analysed manually to identify mismatches in grammatical gender agreement. Specifically, a search was conducted for pronouns and possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns, given that English has no gender in articles and determiners. Additionally, possible grammatical gender

mismatches caused by nominal ellipsis were also detected manually. After the manual identification of pronouns, possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns, a mechanical search of these items was also carried out using the search option of the text processor *Word* to be sure that all the occurrences of failure in grammatical gender agreement were located.

The frequencies of mismatches of grammatical gender agreement were counted and normalised to 10,000 words given that the sub-corpora had different numbers of tokens. Once all the mismatches had been found, examples were discussed at each proficiency level to identify the cause of grammatical gender agreement with inanimate objects. The causes identified were related to the transfer of their mother tongue, i.e. Spanish.

Finally, the components of communicative competence were considered to study whether mismatches in grammatical gender agreement may affect communication in English. This was discussed bearing in mind the different levels of English proficiency studied in order to identify mismatches that might be caused by a poor knowledge of English. To finish the study, conclusions were drawn.

4. Results and discussion

The results obtained from the analysis of the four sub-corpora revealed, as expected, that grammatical gender agreement is not a common failure in Spanish learners of English. Table 2 shows the occurrences and normalised frequencies (N) per level of language proficiency:

Table 2. Occurrences of mismatches in grammatical gender agreement

Levels of language proficiency	Occurrences of syntactic failure	Occurrences of mother tongue transfer (N)
A2 proficiency level	0	27 (22.79)
B1 proficiency level	1	13 (9.07)
B2 proficiency level	0	3 (1.91)
C1 proficiency level	0	0 (0.00)
Total	0	43 (7.32)

Only one occurrence caused by syntactic failure was found at the levels analysed, and it could be a mistake (it can be seen in example [2], B1-A). It may therefore be said that the acquisition of the syntactic arrangement of pronouns and possessive adjectives and pronouns by Spanish learners of English is effective and successful even at low levels of proficiency. The occurrences found in the analysis of the corpus also revealed that failure in grammatical gender agreement was more frequent at low proficiency levels than at higher levels, as few or no frequencies were found at higher levels such as B2 and C1.

After studying the occurrences in detail, it also seems that the mismatches in grammatical gender agreement only take place when Spanish learners of English transfer the gender of an inanimate noun from their mother tongue. This may indicate that learners with low levels of language proficiency whose mother tongue has grammatical gender agreement tend to translate from their mother tongue and use the gender assigned in it. The fact that these failures disappeared at higher levels indicates that the correct pronouns, possessive adjectives and pronouns are acquired very quickly by Spanish learners. This could be due to the low complexity of grammatical gender in English, so once students increase their knowledge of English, they are able to use grammatical gender agreement correctly in that language. Ayoun (2007) pointed out that "The question is whether adult L2 learners can acquire new functional categories which do not exist in the L1 at all, or functional categories existing in the L1 but with different values in the L2" (p. 143).

The results of this analysis have shown that new functional categories existing in the mother tongue but different in the target language can be acquired by learners, given that grammatical gender mismatches appear at low proficiency levels, but they do not appear at higher levels. This shows that, after instruction, Spanish learners acquired grammatical gender agreement in English.

Additionally, it was observed (in B1 learners) overuse of the definitive article in English in inanimate nouns, as in "Cables are driven along *the** pipelines by the flow of *the** water". This is not related to gender agreement, but it may support the idea of the influence of the mother tongue in low levels of English proficiency.

The data obtained here were expected, taking into consideration previous studies that identified gender violations at different levels of language proficiency (Sagarra and Herschensohn, 2010; White et al., 2004) and the fact that these authors also observed that beginners do not show any sensitivity to gender agreement violations. The results obtained here are thus in the same line, evidencing that mismatches decrease at the same pace as grammatical knowledge increases. As mentioned by Ayoun (2007), a strong tendency to use the plural forms of pronouns (e.g. *them*) was also observed in the corpus. This use of the plural means that learners do not have to decide whether the inanimate noun is masculine or feminine or if the neuter pronoun (e.g. *it*) should be used. Additionally, there was a tendency to repeat nouns instead of using pronouns, which is a strategy that allows learners to avoid mismatches in grammatical gender agreement; for example, in "The use of *social media* is something usual in young people, but *social media* can become a danger for the youngest, who try to use *social media* without the knowledge they need" (B2-23).

Furthermore, language transfer was also seen to occur in the agreement of inanimate nouns and pronouns, but learners did not transfer nominal ellipsis. I did find number disagreement at low levels of language proficiency, such as in the sentence "Now the vehicles are more *comfortables*" (B1-40), which is also due to mother

tongue transfer, as in Spanish adjectives can be plural (*cómodos*) or singular (*cómodo*). This fact coincides with Sabourin, Stowe and de Haan (2006: 26) Stowe and de Haan (2006, who stated that "making use of a noun's gender in an agreement context is much harder to do". When learners rely on their mother tongue to acquire syntactic-level knowledge in a target language, this may make the learning process harder. Grammatical gender agreement should be learnt as a new process, as there are no similarities between English and Spanish. The transfer of grammatical gender agreement in this case was negative in the learning process.

Instances of the occurrences found in the three sub-corpora can be seen in example [1], which shows examples from the A2 proficiency level, example [2], which displays the B1 proficiency level, and example [3], which corresponds to the B2 proficiency level. Examples of the C1 proficiency level are not shown as no grammatical gender agreement mismatches were found.

[1] A2

A) "Internet is a useful form of work. When *she* appeared it was a revolution". (A2-03)

In these sentences, the learner refers back to 'Internet' with a feminine personal subject pronoun instead of using the English pronoun for inanimate nouns (that is, *it*), this may be caused because Spanish speakers use the pronoun *ella* (she) to refer to the internet (a feminine noun in Spanish: *la internet, la red*). The learner therefore transfers the grammatical rule employed in Spanish and uses the feminine personal pronoun to refer to the internet.

B) "I can't take breakfast because if I take *him* I lose the bus that I take everydays". (A2-32)

In this example, the speaker uses the personal object pronoun *him* to refer to *breakfast*, even when in Spanish the particle used is

neuter (*si lo tomara*). The learner transfers the grammatical gender agreement from Spanish, but this strategy is not based on translation, as in the previous example. In this case, the learner uses an object pronoun but with the incorrect form, assigning the gender of the inanimate noun in Spanish.

C) "The teenagers even don't have enough capacity to prevent from *he* [the internet], also *it* will get them into trouble". (A2-40)

Here, the writer refers to the internet but fails in grammatical gender agreement, using a subject pronoun after the preposition and, additionally, this is a pronoun for the masculine gender. In this case, as pointed out by White et al. (2004), the writer prefers the use of the masculine pronoun even when in Spanish a feminine pronoun or no pronoun is used for the internet. Thus, in this example we can observe failure in gender agreement and gender assignment.

[2] B1

A) "probably children would spend too much time with the computer, in fact *he* does it now. But it would be a good hobby because by *him* that time could be spent for learn other cultures" (B1-08)

Here, the subject noun, *children*, is referred to as *him* in the second sentence. In this case, the learner uses the masculine object pronoun at the beginning of the clause, therefore giving rise to a mismatch of grammatical gender syntactic position and agreement, by transferring the Spanish expression '*para él*'. The learner does not consider children as plural, but as masculine singular; additionally, in the first sentence the learner uses the singular masculine subject pronoun to refer to *children*: 'in fact *he* does'. This case again reinforces the idea that learners prefer the masculine gender, a fact also pointed out by Liceras et al. (2008). In our analysis this happens when learners are not certain about functional aspects. In this

sample, the learner does not acquire new functional categories which do not exist in the mother tongue, but instead adapts the functions of the mother tongue to the target language.

B) "Although I have some bad moments in my life as a teenager, I wouldn't change *her* parts because I also get good situations." (B1-28)

In this case, the failure is caused by the use of *her* (feminine singular possessive pronoun) instead of using the possessive adjective for inanimate nouns and animals *its*. Here, the learner has not acquired the possessive adjectives correctly and then he/she refers to the conceptual image of the noun *life* in his/her mother tongue and uses the feminine adjective form of the Spanish noun *la vida*.

C) "It has been a major concern for people that they have to teach how to use social media safely and legally. Some people hold that *she* is very important, especially the teenagers" (B1-40)

Here, the learner refers to *social media* as feminine and singular with the subject pronoun *she*. This may be caused by the fact that the noun *media* ends in –*a*, which is associated to feminine nouns in Spanish (Harris 1991). The use of a singular pronoun is rather odd as in Spanish it is a plural noun '*redes sociales*' or '*medios sociales*', the first being feminine and the second masculine. In English, social media is usually plural when we refer to different media, but it might be used in singular when we are referring to it as a single phenomenon. Perhaps the learner may have acquired the idea that it is singular when reading news on the internet and then decided on the feminine form from the ending.

[3] B2

A) "It isn't only a way to spend your time but also a page that allows you to know how our society is. It's well worth visiting *her* in order to understand why famous people sometimes feel" (B2-05)

Very few occurrences were found in the sub-corpora of learners with B2 proficiency level. The object pronoun is used in its feminine form '*her*' to refer to '*page*' (that is, in Spanish *la página*), a mistake that should not be produced by learners with a B2 level. I think this may be a mistake on the part of the learner, given the few occurrences found at this level. I, therefore, consider it an exception, as lexical and grammatical English gender and gender agreement should have already been acquired by the B2 level.

B) "In conclusions, if the new transport is better for us we will have to find the correct way for using *him*" (B2-27)

This is the same case: I think it is a mistake, as the learner employs the object pronoun *him* to refer to the noun *transport*, which is singular and masculine in Spanish (*el transporte*).

It seems that Spanish learners acquire grammatical gender agreement in the early stages of foreign language acquisition, and this is not a problem for advanced speakers of English. Hence, the data presented here reveal that English learners should be aware of the differences between the Spanish and English grammatical gender systems, which will enable them to avoid mismatches.

Regarding the different components of communicative competence, here I studied the written production or performance of English learners with different levels of language proficiency. At each stage of proficiency, I analysed how failure in grammatical gender agreement may affect their communicative competence in order to be able to provide some guidelines to help language teachers and learners avoid mismatches.

The discourse component involves the selection, sequencing and arrangement of words, structures, sentences and utterances to obtain a unified written text. Grammatical gender agreement is related to the component of pronouns; in deixis, it is part of the coherence of discourse and links the situational context. Discourse

may therefore be affected by mismatches in grammatical gender agreement as the argumentative flow might be disrupted by mother tongue transfer. Here, special guidelines about the importance of pronouns should be given to learners, stressing the idea that they should not use translation strategies.

The linguistic component comprises the basic elements of communication, that is, the sentence patterns and types, the morphological inflections, the lexical resources and the phonological and orthographic systems needed to communicate. Grammatical gender elements are related to lexicon, which includes determiners, pronouns and adjectives, and they are thus related to linguistic competence. In this component, both language learners and teachers should pay special attention to lexicon and to the linguistic elements that play a vital role in grammatical gender agreement, as well as establishing the relationships of these linguistic elements and consequently avoiding failure.

The actional component conveys and matches actional determination with linguistic form, based on the knowledge of verbal schemata. It is very close to interlanguage pragmatics and rhetorical competence. This component is not affected by mismatches in grammatical gender agreement, as actional competence is related to pragmatic aspects of language.

The sociocultural component refers to the speaker's knowledge of how to express messages appropriately in a given social and cultural context of communication. Grammatical gender agreement is more related to syntax than to pragmatics, so the sociocultural component is not affected by its failures.

Finally, the strategic component could be defined as knowledge of communication strategies and how to use them. As explained before, one of its sub-components is achievement and compensatory strategies, and one of the aspects taken into account is literal translation from the mother tongue and other compensatory strategies carried out by learners to communicate in a foreign

language even when their language proficiency is low. The mismatches of grammatical gender agreement found in the corpus may be one strategic component used by Spanish learners to be able to communicate in English.

As can be seen, in communicative competence the components related to discourse, linguistics and strategies may be affected by lack of grammatical gender agreement. The actional component and the sociocultural component are more related to functional aspects of language communication and, on the contrary, grammatical gender is more associated to generative and structural characteristics of language.

English learners and teachers should thus take into account the fact that grammatical gender agreement may affect communicative competence in several ways and this proposal may serve as a checklist that language teachers can refer to.

5. Conclusions

This study has shown that mismatches in grammatical gender agreement disappear when learners acquire foreign language proficiency. Learners with lower proficiency levels rely on mother tongue transfer on some occasions and transfer mother tongue gender agreement when referring to inanimate nouns. Some of those beginning to learn English display insensitivity to gender concord but this mismatch disappears when knowledge of the language increases. This may be due to the fact that English relies on word order to indicate the syntactic functions of words, and the syntactic form and function of pronouns have already been acquired at higher levels.

The objectives of this paper were, first, to identify mismatches in English grammatical gender acquisition when learnt by Spaniards at different levels of language acquisition. This objective has been

shown in Table 2 and it can be seen that few occurrences of grammatical gender agreement mismatches were found, as expected, given that Spanish learners have a mother tongue with a well-established grammatical gender system and English has a poor one.

The second objective was to check whether mismatches were produced by mother tongue transfer and, in this vein, the first research question also asked about the influence of the mother tongue on the way speakers with grammatical gender agreement acquire a language with a poorer grammatical gender system. The mismatches of grammatical gender agreement were only related to mother tongue transfer – indeed, only one occurrence was found that showed syntactic failure. From our analysis it may therefore be said that at low levels of language proficiency, learners rely on their mother tongue when they do not know how to use certain functions. Most Spanish learners acquire grammatical gender correctly in English, as it is a poor system that is not difficult to manage. Yet, some cases were identified that transfer grammatical gender agreement to the target language.

Regarding the second research question about dissimilarities in the use of grammatical gender at different levels of language proficiency, it was observed that the vast majority of mismatches were found at lower levels of language proficiency and very few were found at higher levels. Given the few differences in grammatical gender in English, learners acquire this very early, as has been shown in the results in Table 2.

Regarding the last objective and research question, the components of communicative competence that may be affected by mismatches in grammatical gender acquisition by Spanish learners of English were identified as those related to discourse, linguistics and strategies. All these components include communicative aspects in which pronouns, adjectives and determiners are involved. Additionally, there might sometimes be communicative strategies in which learners transfer certain linguistic aspects from the mother tongue.

It should be highlighted that the findings from this analysis contradict those obtained by Morgan-Short et al. (2010), who stated that learners do not generally depend on mother tongue mechanisms. In this study, it has been shown that Spanish learners with a low level of proficiency in English rely on Spanish mechanisms and use personal pronouns for inanimate nouns. The data presented here are in line with Montrul et al. (2008), who explained that foreign language learners rely on explicit learning or a different cognitive system to learn gender agreement, as Bley-Vroman (1990) also pointed out.

Although White et al. (2004) defended the position that both naturalistic and classroom input contribute to underlying abstract knowledge of gender, it has been shown that knowledge of the Spanish gender system should be stored, represented and deployed differently when learning English. We have to consider implicit gender knowledge (which is a rich gender system in Spanish) and explicit gender knowledge, the one learned by Spanish learners of English, which is simpler and easier in comparison to their mother tongue but should also be automatised to be deployed in English writing. This means that lower level learners rely on transfer strategies to write English, drawing on the knowledge of gender in their mother tongue. Incomplete acquisition in instructed English learners might be due to both variable input and access to different language learning mechanisms.

I am aware that this study has limitations, as more essays could have been included to find more occurrences, but the collection of a corpus of these characteristics, made up of different proficiency levels, was not an easy task. This could be done for future studies. Further research could also consist in the compilation of an oral corpus delivered by learners with the same proficiency levels included in this study to compare the grammatical gender agreement mismatches of Spanish learners of English and check whether the results are similar to those presented in this study.

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