Problems in Verb Conjugation in Spanish Among Malaysian Chinese Students: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study examines the written production of four Malaysian Chinese students at two different levels in their study. More specifically, this study employs Error Analysis to determine the type of errors committed in verb conjugations when they were in the middle of the first semester (Spanish 1) and in the middle of the second semester (Spanish 3) of their undergraduate Spanish language and linguistics programme.

A distinction is made between "error" and "mistake" and how both terms are interrelated and apply to the data studied. The errors were classified not only according to the different error categories drawn by Brown (2000) but also according to the different grammatical functions they served.

The results revealed that errors in verb conjugation in Spanish do not have anything to do with how many languages they speak or how inflected a target language may be, but rather are influenced by other different and yet interrelated aspects in Second Language Acquisition such as linguistic input and individual differences. This raises crucial theoretical questions as to whether L2 acquisition is influenced by the environmental factors that govern the input to which learners are exposed, or of internal mental factors which somehow dictate how learners acquire grammatical structures. Moreover, it was found that if problems in conjugating verbs in Spanish are to be attributable to one phenomenon, that phenomenon is intraference and not so much interference.

Introduction

Teachers of a second or third language must know that the learning process in the acquisition of a foreign language is a succession of different stages ranging from the simplest to the most complex, in which the learner adds, deletes and restructures his grammar rules. In other words, it is a process through which the learner will internalize the norms that make up a language as a means of communication. These sets of grammatical, lexical and functional tools will help him develop his linguistic and communication strategies at any particular point in time.

Teachers might wonder why students repeat the same errors and what can be done to help them overcome such errors. The problem is that until now it has not been possible to construct a theory that can comprehensively and reliably explain the errors occurring during the acquisition of a foreign language. This is fundamentally due to the fact that the phenomenon is very complex and studies in the area are relatively new. Furthermore, it was not until the end of the 1960's that theoreticians began to understand errors produced by foreign language learners.

First, when it was thought that the structures from one language to another were copied, the influence or interference of the mother tongue on the new language as a source of errors began to be investigated. That is how the Contrastive Analysis theory (CA) (came into conception), which involves the formal description of the mother tongue and the foreign language, contrasting them to establish the different structures between each one and so predict the errors that may appear in the learning process. However, new studies in the 70's show that not all the errors catalogued as possible by Contrastive Analysis were produced and that many of the errors made could not be explained as influenced of the mother tongue. This was the break-point for Error Analysis (EA) to appear.

Thus, transition about the development of learner language helps teachers to assess teaching procedures based on what they know the students can accomplish in the classroom. Teachers analysing learner language try to determine whether their students have learnt what they have been taught, and how closely the students' language matches the target language. However, progress cannot always be measured in these terms. Sometimes, movement from one milestone in a sequence of language development to another can actually lead from apparently correct performance to incorrect performance.

Thus, an increase in the number of errors may be an indication of progress. An example of this is the use of irregular verbs. Similar to young children, adult second language (L2) and foreign language (FoL) learners usually learn the regular form of verbs before the irregular ones. This may result in

learners applying conjugation rules relating to regular verbs onto irregular ones. For example, a learner of Spanish might produce *yo no cabo* instead of *no quepo (I don't fit)*, where there is an overgeneralization of regular verbs that end in *-ar* and *-er* such as "*caber*" in this case. Although the learner makes an error, this may constitute a trial and error process in which the learner is simply hypothesising what the correct target verb form would be.

The data gathered from the second examination given to the students analyzed, accord with the fact that verbs are one of the trickiest areas of Spanish for foreigners as they are fairly complex, with over fifty conjugated forms per verb; that is, Spanish presents a moderate-to-high degree of inflection which shows up mostly in verb conjugations. This is revealed in the two different moods (indicative and subjunctive), each of which has. present, preterit, antepresent, antepreterit, future and antefuture and some other tenses in the indicative mood such as: copretent, antecopreterit, postpreterit and antepostpreterit.

Subject- verb agreement in number and gender is also a difficult aspect of the Spanish language to grasp because Spanish not only has a two-gender system (feminine and masculine) but also the verb must accord with the person in number (plural and singular). It was, in fact, the one category in which the students in this study committed the most errors (21). Sentences one and six in the classification of verb conjugation errors (see data analysis) are two examples of such errors.

This paper, therefore, examines samples of learner language to determine the types of verb conjugation errors that learners of Spanish make and discusses what these errors can tell us about the learners' knowledge of the language and their ability to use that knowledge.

The objectives of the study are to categorize the errors by different types, to identify the problems the subjects face and to determine the level of influence the mother tongue has on the word conjugation choice of the subjects. As such, the study proposes to seek answers to the following research questions:

1   To what extent do verb conjugation errors present evidence of students' misinterpretations of the verbal systems in Spanish?
2   To what extent do students' errors in verb conjugation reflect or confirm the complexity of conjugating verbs in Spanish?
3   To what extent does the influence from all the languages that these Chinese students speak account for all the verb conjugation errors?

Literature Review

This study uses Error Analysis and not Contrastive Analysis as a theory to predict and explain learners' mistakes or errors because researchers have found that not all errors predicted by the CAH are actually made. Furthermore, many of the errors which learners make are not predictable on the basis of the CAH. For example, adult beginners use simple structures in the target language either because of simplification or overgeneralization, such as, *yo sabo* or *yo he escribido*; instead of *yo se* (*I know*) and *he escrito* (*I have written*), just as children do in their native language. Thus, such sentences are more similar to a child's first language (L1) production than a translation from another language. Lightbown and Spada (1999· 75) have referred to these error types, which are common to both learners, as "developmental errors" and sustain that indeed some of these errors are shared by many learners across the world regardless of their L1 backgrounds. According to Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2003 361) like children, adults can go through 3 phases in their learning process of an irregular Spanish form.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
No quepo	no cabo	no quepo

In Phase 1, the learner uses the correct term, but at this point the learner's grammar does not relate the form *quepo* to *caber* The words are treated as separate lexical entries. In Phase 2 the learner constructs a rule for forming the past tense and attaches the regular past tense morpheme to all verbs. Learners look for general patterns and for syntactic occurrences. What the learner does not know at phase 2 is that there are exceptions to the rule, yet he is creatively constructing his own interpretation of the rule to arrive at the correct term in the target language, implying that a learner who says *cabo* may know more than a learner who says *quepo* because the latter may just be guessing what the correct form would be. Corder (1967) claimed that when learners produce correct sentences, they may simply be repeating something they have already heard; when they produce sentences which differ from the target language, we may assume that these sentences reflect the learners' current understanding of the rules and patterns of that language.

In Phase 3, the learner learns that there are exceptions to the rules and then once again uses *quepo* with the difference being that at this stage the learner is able to make connections between the irregular forms and the root forms. In other words, when learners acquire a grammatical structure they do so gradually, moving through a series of stages to acquiring the native-speaker rule. According to Ellis (1997· 23), "The acquisition of a particular grammatical

structure, therefore, must be seen as a process involving transitional constructions" and adds: "acquisition follows a U-shape of development; that is, initially learners may display a high level of accuracy only to apparently regress later before finally once again performing in accordance with target-language norms". This kind of reorganization, therefore, is referred to as restructuring. In this respect, Lightbown and Spada (1999: 41) suggest: "restructuring can sometimes lead to apparent backsliding when a systematic aspect of the language incorporates too much or the wrong way".

E A, therefore, is based on the assumption that like child language, the language of adult second language learners is a system in its own right, that is, it is one which is rule-governed and predictable. Cook (1993: 20) says that: "Error Analysis is a complex methodology for studying second language acquisition, which approaches L2 learning through a detailed analysis of the learner's own speech"

Selinker (1972) used the term "interlanguage" to refer to learners' developing second language knowledge. Nemser (1971) referred to the same general phenomenon in second language learning but stressed the successive approximation to the target language in his term approximative system. Corder (1971) used the term idiosyncratic dialect to connote the idea that the learner's language rule is unique to a particular individual alone.

According to Ellis (1997· 19) "errors are not only systematic, but many of them are also universal and some are common only to learners who share the same mother tongue or whose mother tongue manifest the same linguistic property" Errors, then, can have different sources. Some errors seem to be universal, reflecting learners' attempts to make the task of learning simpler; as is the case when they commit errors of simplification or omission. They also overgeneralize forms that they find easy to learn and process. The use of "oiges, ois, acostas" in place of "oyes" and "acuestas" (as we will see later) is an example of an overgeneralization error.

It is clear, however, that it is often very difficult to determine the source of errors because EA does not always give us clear insights into what causes learners to do what they do. Furthermore, learners sometimes avoid using certain features of language, which they perceive to be difficult for them. The rationale and occurrence of this avoidance strategy is difficult to determine, even though it may also be a part of the learner's systematic second language performance. This is because its very use ensures that almost no errors will be committed, which leaves us without information about the learner's developing interlanguage. For example, Ellis (1997· 51) reports one study in which Chinese and Japanese learners of English avoid the use of relative clauses because their L1s do not contain equivalent structures. These learners make

fewer errors in relative clauses than Arabic learners of English but only because they rarely use them.

In analysing learner errors, a distinction needs to be made between errors and mistakes. Both mistakes and errors are two terms that had been used indistinguishably and interchangeably until Corder (1971) defined them differently. Corder (1971) refers to errors of performance as "mistakes", reserving the term "error" to refer to the systematic errors of the learner, that is, "errors of competence". Thus, "mistakes are any inaccuracies in linguistic production in either the L1 or L2 that are caused by fatigue, inattention, etc., and that are immediately correctable by the speaker or writer" (Scovel 2001. 48). Irrespective of their underlying psychological origin, mistakes are miscues in "performance", a term Chomsky (1965) introduced to refer to the overt production of language whether in speech or writing. Both native and non-native speakers make mistakes, and these include misspelled words. The essence of this category of miscue, according to Corder (1971), is that a mistake demonstrates no misunderstanding of the correct, underlying linguistic structure. As Chomsky (1965, cited in Scovel, 2001 49) asserts, "Mistakes then, reveal nothing about the underlying competence a language user has about language structure"

Errors, on the other hand, are gaps in competence and have to do with grammar. Therefore, it is argued that native speakers, because they have almost full knowledge of the linguistic structures of their mother tongue, never make errors, only mistakes, while learners not only make mistakes but also errors due to their incomplete understanding of the target language. However, the former is doubtful as even L1 speakers are bound to make both errors and mistakes. For example, through personal experience as a language teacher, I have heard that Spanish native speakers are bound to produce *hubieron* (the past tense plural of *haber*), instead of *hubo* and *aiga(n)* instead of *haya(n)* (*there is, there are*).

Another concept in E A is intraference, which refers to "the confusion a language learner experiences when confronting conflicting patterns within the structures of a newly acquired language, irrespective of how the target language patterns might contrast with the learner's mother tongue" (Scovel 2001: 51). It is intraference more than interference that leads L 2 learners to take a guess about what could be grammatically acceptable in their new language. These inferences are not always correct, but they are an indicator of the learners' creativity in the Second or Foreign Language Acquisition process and show furthermore, that they are not just responding from the habits they acquired while picking up their L1, as the behaviourists would claim. As defined by Corder (1967), errors are a way the learner has of testing his hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning.

From a behaviourist's perspective, "interference is based on old habits whereas intraference is based on new habits" (Scovel 2001 53). Like children who acquire their L1 by creating new words and new rules, adult learners create new L2 or FoL constructions increasing in degrees of complexity from their overgeneralizations of what they have acquired in the target language. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, cited in Scovel 2001· 54) coined the term "creative construction" to describe this innovative view of learner's errors.

Methodology

This study examines the leaner language of four Malaysian Chinese students studying Spanish as part of their undergraduate degree requirements. The students who participated in the study are all local female Chinese students with ages ranging from 20 to 22 years old who are currently taking their second semester in Spanish language. The fact that the group analyzed is limited in number (only four girls) may be seen as a limitation in the design. Therefore, this can be considered a case study that was conducted at two different

These students have to take 6 levels of Spanish in one and a half years, that is to say, 2 levels of Spanish in one semester (14 weeks) with an intensity of 16 hours a week. By the time the first set of data was collected, they had already completed level 1, that is, they had already been studying Spanish for 7 weeks. The second set of data was collected at the time they completed level 3 The data comprises two midterms tests the students sat for. Both tests comprised a reading passage, followed by open-ended comprehension questions, gap filling, text completion and sentence construction. A composition-writing task was included at the end of the second test to avoid exam design bias. As the teacher's ability to design exams was not the issue here, a closer look at whether any of the errors presented by these students were the result of any misunderstanding in these examinations' directions or layout was not verified. This might have led to another limitation in this study.

To give a particular example, in the fifth part of the first examination, they had to write sentences using the cue words given, but in the second sentence the teacher failed to make clear whether she wanted them to make sentences using the verb "pintar" (to paint) as reflexive "pintarse" using the pronoun "Yo" (I), or as transitive "pintar" followed by the direct object "la casa" (the house); in fact, she contradicted herself and indeed confused the students as to which form to use because she gave both options. This is the actual example extracted from the examination:

2- Pintarse (Yo la casa)

It follows that the students could have either made sentences using the verb as *reflexive* '
(I paint my face during Halloween), or could have also used it as *transitive* followed by the direct object given such as: "yo pinto la casa todos los fines de año" (I paint the house every end of the year). As a result, the students ended up combining them both into one and came up with sentences such as: "yo me pinto la casa con Juan" (I paint myself the house with John), or "me pinto en la casa" (I paint myself in the house), the latter being less erroneous.

The students' production in the tests was analysed to determine the type of verb conjugation errors that are most frequently made by these Chinese students of Spanish as a foreign language.
written form, it is worth citing Krashen's monitor hypothesis, in which he states that, "writing may be more conducive than speaking to monitor use because it usually allows more time for attention to form" (cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 38). It is needless to say that the students' speech in which errors may quite differ from the ones collected for this study was not analysed.

Apart from the two mid-term tests collected, the students were also given a questionnaire with a set of 8 questions seeking information on linguistic factors that affect their mastering of the verb conjugations in Spanish. This was carried out to determine if their mother tongue posed as a significant obstacle in their grasping the different verb inflections and tenses of the new language they are currently learning.

It is to note, that the study does not focus on error treatment; therefore, efforts to find out the criteria used to correct errors were not included.

Data Analysis and Findings

First, all the errors were classified according to the different grammatical functions they serve whilst taking into consideration, the different error categories proposed by Brown (2000). It is important to note, however, that only those syntactical errors that are directly related to verbs were analyzed; some other categories like *article omission, preposition addition*, complement of time placement (*ordering*) and so on, although presented in the graphs, were not discussed. A distinction between mistake and error was not made explicit here either because first of all, the study is clearly on errors and secondly, to do so we would have to turn to what Brown (2000) called "*frequency of deviant forms*" as a criterion, but since the number of subjects studied is only four, there is not enough data to establish the frequency of deviant forms with certainty.

When analyzing the information gathered in the first test, this is what was found.

The most generalized breakdown can be made, according to Brown (2000: 222) by identifying errors of *addition*, *omission*, *substitution* and *ordering*, following standard mathematical categories. Some examples of these errors are listed below:

Substitution

1   "Mi amiga y yo **juego** tennis en el parque"
2   "Nosotros **vais** a estudiar"

In these two sentences, the correct verb conjugation ("jugamos" and "vamos", which correspond to the first person plural) were substituted by the conjugation of the first person singular "yo" and second person plural "vosotros" respectively.

Local errors

Other errors, known as local errors, affect only a single constituent in the sentence (for example the verb) and are perhaps less likely to create any processing problems. Brown (2000: 223) says: "local errors do not prevent the message from being understood, usually because there's only a minor violation of one segment of a sentence, allowing the reader or hearer to make an accurate guess about the intended meaning". These are some of the examples taken from the examination, the word in parenthesis shows the correct conjugation of the verb for each one of the sentences.

1   "Tu **oiges** (*oyes*) la radio con mucha frecuencia"
2   "Tu **oigo** (*oyes*) la radio con mucha frequencia"
3   "Tu **ois** (*oyes*) la radio con mucha frequencia"
4   "Yo **pueno** (*pongo*) los libros sobre la mesa"
5   "Tu **me** (*te*) **acostas** (acuestas) a las 10 pm"
6   "Las clases **empienzan** (*empiezan*) a la una de la tarde"
7   "Vosotros **pensa** (*penséis*) solo en divertirse"
8   "Nosotras **estudamos** (*estudiamos*) Español"
9   "Los viernes ellos **salin** (*salen*) de compras ● van **a el** (*al*) parque"

In these sentences although the verbs are wrongly conjugated, the message is still clear and we know what the students wanted to say. Had

the verbs been properly conjugated, these would have been their equivalents in English.

1   "You listen to radio very often" (for the first three sentences)
4   "I put the books on bed"
5   "You go to bed at 10 pm"
6   "The classes start at one in the afternoon"
7   "You only think of having fun"
8   "We study Spanish"
9   "On Fridays, they go shopping or go to a park"

Hypergeneralization
This refers to the extension of learnt or inferred rules of a language to fields where they are not accepted according to the rules of that language (in this case the rules of Spanish).

1   "El teléfono de tu casa sueno (*suena*) muy duro" (Your house phone rings very loud)

In this sentence, the verb form *sueno* was constructed because of parallelism with the endings of the simple present of the indicative mood.

All in all, there were 15 sentences in which the verb was wrongly conjugated as opposed to the other categories, in other words, the errors present in this first test clearly show that most of them were made in verb conjugation.

Figure 1 shows a classification of the above errors from the grammatical perspective, in which the categorization previously given by Brown (2000) was rearranged to show in a clearer way the syntactical errors these Chinese students made by the time they had finished Level 1
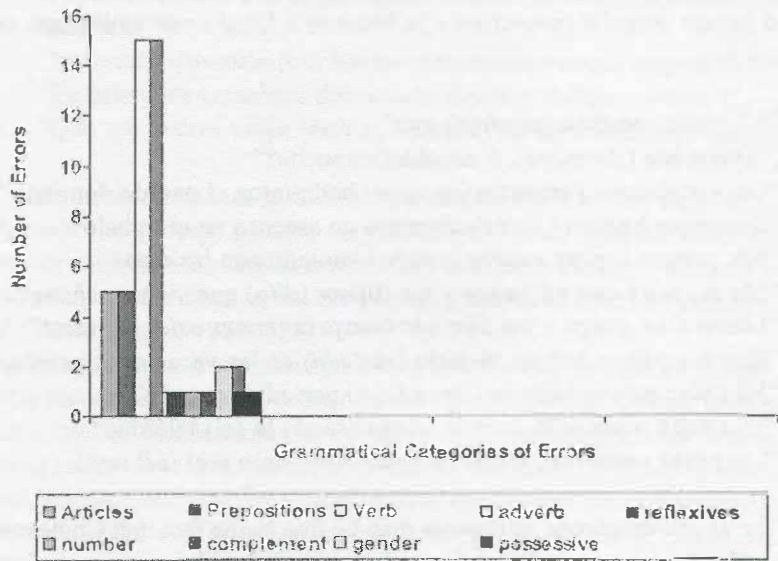
Figure 1 Verb Conjugation Errors

The above diagram indicates the results of verb conjugation and tenses of the second test that was analysed. The following are some of the more significant examples.

The words in bold show when the verb conjugation error occurred and the words in parenthesis show the correct conjugation for each one of the sentences.

The sources of errors here are varied and sometimes it is difficult to group them into one or other category because some of the sentences fall under more than one classification of errors, but generally speaking, it can be said that there were errors that were the cause of *overgeneralisation* as in the case of sentence 3, where the students thought that the past tense (preterit) of the verb *"jugar"* (to play) had an "e" in between as in the conjugation in simple present tense for all the pronouns except in *"nosotros"* and *"vosotros"*, sentence 9, where they thought that the continuous tense of *"leer"* had an "i" as is the case of its past tense (preterit) and sentence 10, where they thought that the past tense (preterit) of the verb *sonar* (to ring) was formed following the stem changes it suffers in simple present tense of the indicative mood, because of *substitution* as in the case of sentences 1, 4, 5 and 6 where they substituted

the verbs for the first person singular, third person plural, preterit tense and second person singular respectively or because a *local error* took place as in 2, 7 and 8.

1　"Mi padre **conduje** (*condujo*) ayer"
2　¿"**Durmiste** (*dormiste*), o estudiaste anoche?"
3　"Los estudiantes **juegaron** (*jugaron*) badminton el pasado domingo"
4　"Su esposa **habian** (*habia*) obtenido un ascenso en el trabajo"
5　"No, porque Jupiter **estuvo** (*estaba*) enojado con las ranas"
6　"Me encontré con mi amiga y me **dijiste** (*dijo*) que viene mañana"
7　"Llamé a un amigo y me dijo que **compria** (*compraria*) un carro"
8　"Que sus padres habian **viejado** (*viajado*) en las vacaciones pasadas"
9　"Mi padre estuvo **leíendo** (*leyendo*) el periodico anoche"
10　"Yo estaba cocinando cuando **sueno** (sonó) **la** (el) teléfono"
11　"Las ranas **nadieron, naderon** (*nadaron*) junto **a el** (*al*) rey"

The above erroneous utterances may be due to the fact that Chinese is a a non-inflected language. What Spanish achieves by changing verb forms, Chinese expresses by means of adverbials, word order and context; therefore, Spanish inflexion seems generally confusing for Chinese learners of Spanish and causes frequent errors (Michael Swan and Bernard Smith 1987 228).

Tenses

The words in parenthesis show that the copreterit (imperfect preterit) for sentences 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 should have been used, as well as for the first clause in sentences 1, 5 and 9 and the antecopreterit (preterit pluscuamperfect) for sentence 10 as well as for the second clause in sentences 1 and 5 and the preterit (indefinite preterit) for the second clause in sentence 9.

1　"No porque **esta** (*estaba*) enfadado con las ranas que le **faltaron** (*habian faltado*) al respeto"
2　"Cuando mi padre era joven, el **estaba jugando** (*jugaba*) futbol en su Universidad"
3　"Cuando yo era pequeña, **estaba viviendo** (*vivia*) en Klang"
4　"Él le dijo que habia comprado un coche nuevo y ahora **esta** (*estaba*) trabajando en Bangsar"
5　"Misan me dijo que le **duele** (*dolia*) el estomago porque **comio** (*habia comido*) mucho"
6　"Cuando mi hermano era bebe **estaba llorando** (*lloraba*) todos los dias"

7   "Mientras **esperamos** (*esperabamos*) a Luisa, **estaba leyendo** (*leiamos*)
     la noticia"
8   "Nosotras **estuvimos** (*estabamos*) estudiando cuando empezo la pelicula"
9   "Tu **estuviste** (*estabas*) durmiendo cuando te **llamo** (*llamé*)"
10   "Que sus padres **viaja** (*habian viajado*) en las vacaciones pasadas"

All these deviances in tenses may be explained by the fact that Chinese
expresses the concept of time very differently from Spanish and English. It
docs not conjugate the verb to express time relations; therefore, Chinese learners
have serious difficulties in handling Spanish tenses and aspects (Michael Swan
and Bernard Smith 1987· 228)

In retrospect, it can clearly be seen that the two categories of verb errors
in this second test outnumber the other categories (gender, article, preposition),
with a total of 16 misconjugated tenses and 21 verb conjugation errors. After
having completed three semesters (about 42 weeks or 672 hours of instruction)
it can be concluded that these learners have not grasped the different inflections
Spanish verbs suffer when being conjugated. In total, there were 37
misconjugated sentences. The features are as follows:

Verb conjugation. 21, article: 15, preposition. 10, adjective-noun order:
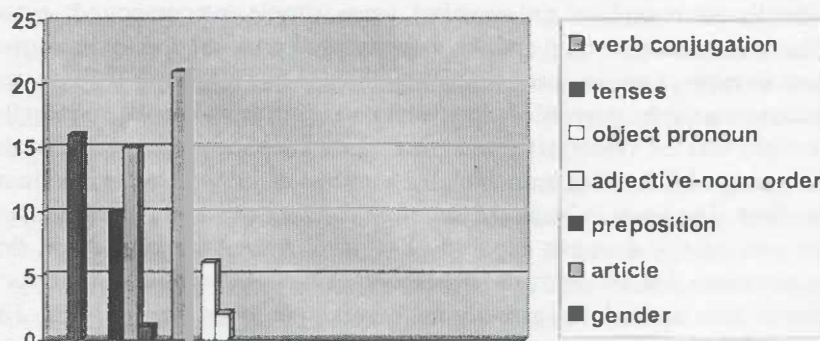2, object pronoun. 6, tenses: 16, gender: 1 Figure 2 shows this percentage in
a diagram.

Figure 2 Verb Conjugation

The data gathered in this second test accords with the figures of the first
test (see Figure 1). All in all, there were 52 errors in verb conjugation as
opposed to 19 errors in articles, 14 errors in prepositions, 3 errors in word
order and gender and 1 error in number, possessive and reflexive and 6 errors

in object pronoun. All these figures accord with the seventh question of the eight-item questionnaire administered to them in which they all agreed that subject-verb agreement (gender and number) and verb conjugation and tenses were the grammatical aspects of the Spanish language that posed more difficulty for them.

In 1996, Alicio conducted a study (the verbal systems of Malay and Spanish), in which he analysed the written products of 9 Malays who were taking Spanish as an elective. He found that thirty two per cent of his respondents had errors in what he called "ignorance of rules restrictions", in which error in subject-verb agreement in person and number was one of the criteria and 55 % had errors in what he called "wrong verbal form" He attributed his findings to the fact that whereas in Spanish almost all grammatical persons contrast with each other in most tenses, Malay takes the same zero verbal ending for all persons. Examples are given below·

Yo estudio	I study	Saya belajar
Tu estudias	You study	Awak belajar
El estudia	He studies	Dia belajar
Nosotros estudiamos	We study	Kami/Kita belajar
Ellos estudian	They study	Mereka belajar

In other words, whereas the Spanish verbs show a multiplicity of forms and each form is generally marked morphologically for person (first, second and third), number (plural and singular), tense (simple and compound), mood (indicative and subjunctive) and voice (active and passive), the Malay verbal system in most cases, is characterized by the use of prefixes or suffixes and its reliance on modal auxiliaries. Spanish is a very inflected language in that the inflections that the verbs suffer when conjugated determine the person or the *doer* (agent) of the action, for which the pronoun is dropped or omitted most of the time. The Spanish language therefore does not explicitly use pronouns. More precisely, it does not explicitly have pronominal subjects. Now, this does not mean that the Spanish language does not use pronouns at all. As a matter of fact, Spanish has actually many more pronouns than English. For instance, Spanish uses the pronoun "*tu*" to refer to the second person singular in informal situations and the pronoun "*vosotros*" to refer to the second person plural, so according to Scovel (2001) the major difference between the two languages here is not lexical but syntactic. Spanish is, in other words, a *pro-drop* language as opposed to English in which deletion of the pronominal subject is not allowed, even in those cases where it is clearly understood by the two interlocutors. He argues then, that "this has nothing to do with how

many pronouns the language might contain, but everything to do with how the grammar of the language works" (Scovel 2001: 66).

Although the subjects are all Chinese, the first question in the eight- item questionnaire administered to them revealed that all four students speak several first languages such as Malay and English; therefore, the problems in understanding the verb conjugations in Spanish must be due to influences from English or Malay, not Chinese or Mandarin because the third item in the questionnaire showed that only one student can actually read, write, speak and understand the Chinese language, the other three can either understand it or read it or write it, but do not have a full command of the four skills of the Chinese language; Besides, English is the language used to understand the new grammar rules, as is revealed in the sixth item of the questionnaire, that is to say, the language in which they translate or associate the new grammar rules of the Spanish language. This may be because it is the medium of instruction used by their teacher to ensure understanding when it is not successful in Spanish.

In conclusion, if any of the languages they know is interfering with their understanding and mastering of the different verb conjugations, that language is more likely to be English, not only because it is the background language, as the fifth item in the questionnaire shows, but also because three of them actually think it is the language, along with Malay, that is causing them more interference in their understanding of the verb inflections in Spanish, as the last item (8th) in the questionnaire shows. So, probably more than one language including English for the reasons mentioned, is causing them confusion in their grasping of the different verb conjugation rules. Cross-linguistic influence might be a big issue here and a further and more detailed research has to be carried out in order to find out which language, if any, is causing these Chinese students to conjugate the Spanish verbs incorrectly.

However, the problems these students face in conjugating the verbs in Spanish may not necessarily be the result of an interference from any of the languages they speak (Malay or English in this particular case), but it could be the result of some other aspects that have nothing to do with how many tenses or how inflected their mother tongue is or how many languages they speak.

Some researchers like Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, cited in Scovel 2001: 49) have concluded, when analyzing Spanish speakers learning English as a second language, that even advanced students of English omit or leave out the "s" in the third person singular (*he*, *she*, and *it*). If the lack of inflection of the languages these students speak (English, Malay and Chinese) is the reason for their inability to master the verb-conjugations in Spanish, then Spanish

learners of English should not have any problems with verb conjugations in the TL, however, this has been found not to be the case.

Spanish has a system of tenses much more inflected and complex than Chinese, English and Malay. Chinese for instance has no suffixes at all for the present tense and no tenses whatsoever. Instead, Chinese verbs can have suffixes that express different aspects, such as perfective. In the sentence *"ta chi-le wan fan" ("he has eaten a bowl of rice"* or *"he had eaten a bowl of rice"),* the verbal marker *"le"* indicates either present or past perfect tense (for more on Chinese verb forms, time, tense and aspect, see Michael Swan and Bernard Smith 1987). On the other hand, while Malay uses prefixes or suffixes in its verbal formation, Spanish depends heavily upon its conjugation. It is by a system of affixation that the Malay verbs achieve its subtlety of shading (Lewis 1968 166). Besides, in Malay, tenses are understood from the context. The same form of verb can be used for the present, past and future tenses. When the sentence is ambiguous, appropriate words or phrases (aspectual auxiliaries) or adverbs of time are used. The following are some examples:

"Isteri saya pulang dari pejabat"   Isteri saya **sudah** pulang dari pejabat
My wife comes back from the office   My wife **came** back from the office
Mi esposa regresa de la oficina   Mi esposa regreso de la oficina
Dia pergi ke sekolah dengan kawannya   Dia pergi ke sekolah **esok** dengan kawannya
He goes to school with his friend   He **will** go to school with his friend tomorrow
El **va** a la escuela con su amigo   El **irá** a la escuela con su amigo manana

Thus, Alicio (1996: 70) concludes that "a Spanish learner of Malay encounters minimal difficulty when learning verbs as opposed to a Malay learner of Spanish who has to be familiar with the different conjugations (characterized by changes in ending) which are not found in Malay" Spanish has many more personal pronouns than English and almost for each person there is one different inflection, in other words, the suffixes added to the verbs outnumber that of the English language, which has only one ("s").

Let us consider one regular verb in Spanish "nadar" (to swim), as an example:

(Yo) nado   I swim
(Tu) nadas
(Usted) nada   You swim
(El, Ella) nada   He, She, It swims
(Nosotros, Nosotras) nad**amos**   We swim
(Vosotros, vosotras) nad**áis**

(Ustedes) nadan	You swim
(Ellos, Ellas) nadan	They swim

The bold letters show the different inflections the Spanish verbs suffer (five different suffixes in total) whereas in English there is only one.

It has been found that Spanish speaking and Chinese speaking ESL students tend to have similar difficulties picking up the third person "s" suffix, as explained earlier. The reason may lie in the intraference phenomenon, which is, according to Scovel (2001), the confusion a language learner experiences when confronting conflicting patterns within the structures of a newly acquired language, irrespective of how the target language patterns might contrast with the learner's mother tongue.

The first question that this study proposed to address was:

> To what extent do verb conjugation errors present evidence of students' misinterpretations of the Spanish verbal systems?

The analysis indicated that, there is a misunderstanding or confusion of the syntactic rules in the conjugation of the Spanish verbs; in other words, these students are not applying the rules accurately and properly. The answer may lie in the intraference phenomenon explained above because it has been proven and concluded that it is intraference and not so much interference that leads them to make intelligent guesses about grammatical patterns in their TL. It is to be noted, however, that these guesses are sometimes correct and sometimes erroneous, but in essence, errors demonstrate that learners are active and creative participants in the SLA process and are not simply responding from the habits they acquired while picking up their mother tongue. Ellis (1985) argues that errors serve as evidence of the learner's active contribution to acquisition and are the external manifestation of the hypothesis testing process which is responsible for the continual revision of the interlanguage system. What is not known yet is the degree or the exact extent of students' ability to face the confusion encountered when learning new grammar rules in the target language. To determine the extent, not only a further study has to be carried out, in which intraference is studied in detail, but also a different perspective has to be given to the present project in which personality factors have to be studied. One of these factors could be students' learning styles and strategies. Last, but not least, it is also necessary to consider how the linguistic input contributes to the process of acquisition.

The second question was:

- To what extent do students' errors in verb conjugation reflect or confirm the complexity of suffixation of the verb in Spanish?

Spanish grammar is one of the trickiest, areas of Spanish grammars for foreigners of different languages to master. The answer lies in the fact that a verb in Spanish is said to be irregular when they undergo changes in their conjugation. These changes in conjugation take place in the root (radical stem changing); although not in all the persons. The infinitives into which the Spanish verbs are classified (ar   er – ir) do not give any clues as to whether the verb stem is regular or irregular and so each verb must be learnt individually. Of the four Spanish simple tenses of the indicative mood (present, preterit, copreterit and future), radical changes only takes place in the first two tenses. However, only verbs belonging to the third group (ir) would undergo the change in the preterit tense; but again not in all the persons. So, the difficulty that these students and the ones in Alicio's study (1996) encountered is their inability to recognize verbs falling under these groups. It can be observed then, that learners tend to make changes in all persons, believing that once a verb undertakes a change in any of the persons, all the other persons will also undergo changes when they should not.

This can be seen in the second sentence in the classification of *verb conjugation errors* given above, in which the verb "*dormir*" (to sleep), which belongs to the second- class stem- changing verb changes the "o" in the stem for "ue" in the present tense except in the pronoun *nosotros* and *vosotros*, but in its preterit tense, it changes the "o" in the stem for "u", but only for the second person singular formal "usted" (you), third person singular "*el* and *ella*" (*he* and *she*) and third person plural "*ellos* and *ellas*" (they). And the verb "*jugar*" (to play) in the third sentence of the same classification, which, although has a "u" in the stem, also belongs to the group of "*dormir*" type, with the difference being that in its preterit tense the stem does not change. It seems then, that students not only tend to carry over the changes a verb suffers to all the pronouns in one tense but also the change of certain verbs in one tense into another where it does not necessarily apply.

The same generalization can be seen in the fifth sentence of *local errors* given above, in which the verb "*acostarse*" (to go to bed) as "*dormir*" belong to the second-class stem-changing verb; that is, it suffers the same changes in the stem in the present tense, but in this particular case, students carried over the conjugation of this verb in the pronoun "*nosotros*", in which it does not change, to the second person singular informal "*tu*", which requires the change from "o" of the stem to "ue" Other examples include sentences one and three

of the same classification of errors, in which students fail to recognize that the verb *"oir"* (*to listen to* or *to hear*) is irregular and takes a "y" in all forms of the present except for *nosotros* and *vosotros* and for the first person singular, which takes a "g" and as a result students tend to either conjugate as regular, producing sentences as: *"ois la radio con mucha frequencia"* as is the case of sentence three, or even hybrid forms believing that the change in the first person is applied to all the pronouns, producing sentences of the *"oiges"* type as in sentence one.

All these examples also help us answer the first question this study aimed at answering, because the fact that irregular verbs in Spanish are classified under three different types plus the so called "G-verbs" depending on the change they suffer in the stem, which is not applied to all the persons and to all the tenses and the fact that the endings "ar", "er" and "ir" for each verb does not give any clues as to whether they are regular or irregular confuses any Spanish student and thus students' errors are a direct reflection of their misinterpretations of the verbal system because of the complexity of suffixation that these Spanish verbs present.

The third question that this study aimed at answering was:

- To what extent does the influence from the different languages they speak account for all the verb conjugation errors?

The analysis already revealed that the languages these students know do not play any significant part, if any, in their understanding of the Spanish verbs and tenses. The different first languages these Chinese students speak (English and Malay) and their mother tongue (Chinese) do not show any obvious influence on their understanding of the verb conjugations in Spanish; that is to say, neither English, Malay nor Chinese are unlikely to be the cause for the problems they are facing in verb conjugations.

Conclusion

It can be concluded then, that much of the problem in learning and applying the correct verb conjugations in Spanish comes from the confusing information about verb suffixation that Spanish itself presents to any learner; that is to say, the problems students have to face in mastering the correct verb conjugations in Spanish come from within the language itself. However, we cannot overlook the possibility of mother tongue interference or crosslinguistic influence because errors are a multi-factor phenomenon and interference is at least one of possibly three of them.

Although learner's L1 seems to be an important determinant of SLA, it is not the only one and may not be the most important. It is almost impossible here to determine its precise contribution because it has to do, among other things, with the linguistic factors on the one hand and the learner's stage of development on the other.

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