Understanding EFL Students' Errors: An Insight towards Their Interlanguage

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Abstract

The present article discusses a study on errors of EFL students and how they are understood by native speakers. Those errors indicate the interlanguage stage in which students are. There are three types of errors: 1) the native speaker does not understand what the student is saying; 2) the native speaker understands what the student is saying despite errors; 3) the native speaker understands something different from what the student is trying to say. This is perhaps the most serious semantic error since the native speaker does not realize that anything is wrong. Based on the findings, suggestions relevant to EFL teaching are made and conclusions are drawn.

Resumen

El presente artículo consiste en un estudio sobre errores cometidos por estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera y entendidos por hablantes cuya lengua materna es inglés; tales errores –a su vez– sirven como indicador de la etapa de interlenguaje en que los alumnos se encuentran. Hay tres tipos de errores: 1) el angloparlante no entiende lo que el estudiante está diciendo; 2) el angloparlante entiende lo que está diciendo el estudiante a pesar de haber errores; 3) el angloparlante entiende algo distinto a lo que trata de decir el estudiante. Este quizá sea el error semántico más serio puesto que el angloparlante no se da cuenta de que hay algo erróneo. Con base en los resultados, se proporcionan sugerencias relevantes para la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera.

The purpose of this article is to discuss a piece of empirical study conducted at a Mexican bilingual university regarding errors students make in the class. Those errors indicate the interlanguage stage in which students are. We also will determine if native speakers of English understand these errors. The paper has been divided intro five sections. The first one provides a theoretical framework with some of the basic categories within the study, such as 'interlanguage' and 'errors'. It also offers a typology with the native speakers' understanding of such errors. The second section briefly explains our data collection procedure as well as information concerning our participants. The third and fourth sections deal with two kinds of analysis (quantitative and qualitative) we carried out in our data interpretation. The last section presents recommendations and final comments.

Background Rationale

Selinker (1972) first introduced the notion of interlanguage (IL) after several years of observation and academic discussion stating that the language (utterances) produced by a L2 learner—although conveying the same meaning— is different from those produced by a native speaker of the

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language, and this "learner language" itself comprises a new linguistic system known as interlanguage. As suggested by Selinker, interlanguage is characterized (at least) by five core components or stages (Cook, 1993; Da Silva and Signoret, 2005; Liceras, 1992). Mexican EFL students' interlanguage as documented by Villalobos (2008) has three main stages related to written production: lexical, syntactic and semantic. Skills related to semantic awareness develop later in L2 learning and are achieved in as much as a high degree of attention is paid to the formal correctness of language use (Hulstijn, 1989).

The students at our university come from a Spanish-speaking discourse community with a social background and language production very likely accepted and shared by their age (15-18 years old). They come to class probably thinking certain sentences and phrases used in Spanish may actually mean the same if they translate exactly the same words from Spanish into English in order to communicate something they want to share. In other words, the students transfer structures, words or cognates from their first language to their target language. The transfer becomes positive when similar structures in both the speaker's first and second language are useful for communication, but it becomes negative when it interferes in the communication (Ellis, 2003; Hendrickson, 1978; Morales, 2005).

An example of transfer could be when a student in class says "apply an exam." If the instructor is a native speaker of Spanish, or has enough background knowledge of the student's mother tongue to understand what the student is trying to say, the communication could be successful but not appropriate for an English-speaking environment. If these same students find themselves at an English-speaking school and are establishing a conversation with their instructor who has little background knowledge of their native language, they may find themselves in a difficult, or humorous, or even embarrassing situation where the receiver cannot understand at all, or where the receiver may understand something totally different from what was originally intended, or simply the receiver may partially guess what was being intended to communicate.

Errors can be classified as local and global depending on the way they can affect the listener's comprehensibility (Hendrickson, 1978). The former is defined as a linguistic type of error making the sentence sound strange, but still the listener can understand totally or partially what the speaker is trying to say. The latter consists of errors in the communication. The listener may misinterpret the message or consider it incomprehensible. Three possibilities may occur in this situation:

1. The native or proficient speaker does not understand what the student is saying. Sometimes the native or proficient speaker detects an error but does not know what the student is trying to say.
2. The native or proficient speaker understands what the student is saying despite errors.
3. The native or proficient speaker understands something different from what the student is trying to say. This is perhaps the most serious semantic mistake since the native speaker does not realize that anything is wrong.

However, presently in language teaching, the tendency for error treatment is more of tolerance than correction although this view is still controversial. Some approaches suggest that errors should no longer be considered negative; on the contrary, they are an opportunity for learners to improve because they can learn from their mistakes (Morales, 2005). In real life situations some errors may be ignored as long as they are not too serious.

Studies in second language writing on tolerance of errors at English-speaking universities revealed that professors do not mind errors as long as they can understand what the student wants to communicate (Camps & Salsbury, 2008; Janopoulos, 1992). Similarly, tolerance may occur when non-native speakers make errors at the moment of speaking to a native or proficient speaker (Brown, 2007; Hendrickson, 1978; Hubbard et al., 1983; Piazza, 1980; Shaw, 1985). We may know that the non-native speaker is making an error, but we do not mind because we believe we can understand what the non-native speaker is trying to say. However, we may ask ourselves how much tolerance and how much understanding we actually have. We may realize this as our conversation develops.

Data Collection and Participants

The purpose of our study was to find out whether native speakers could actually understand or not understand errors from non-native speakers of English. For this reason, we designed a survey of statements (see Appendix 1) based on a small corpus consisting of sentences with common errors from Mexican undergraduate students of English at a private university in the State of Mexico. The students, from basic to advanced levels, made these errors in both oral and written production at various instances in class and throughout semesters.

The corpus was collected by language instructors who noticed their students' specific errors and compiled them in Word files for feedback purposes. In this way, we selected fourteen sentences from the corpus we deemed relevant to incorporate in the survey. The criterion for selecting the sentences was on the basis of what a native speaker could totally or partially understand or not understand.

In the survey, the participants would have to answer whether they understood or did not understand the sentences. If they reported that they did, they would have to provide an explanation about what they had understood. The survey was sent to a Spanish instructor at a co-educational private high school in Biloxi, Mississippi who agreed to use it with his students and to return it to us. This high school was chosen because we knew the instructor. Thus, there were 22 participants who were middle class, teenage students from grades 9th to 12th.

Quantitative Analysis of the Survey

We listed the students' responses to each question in Excel spreadsheets with two columns for each. The first column included the affirmative responses coded under the category of affirmative response. The second column included the negative responses coded under the category of negative response. Next to these columns we typed each the students' explanation for each affirmative response. We gave a value of one to both affirmative and negative responses. We then went over each of the

students' explanations and inserted three separate columns in each of the Excel spreadsheets with three categories based on whether the students really, not really, or partially understood, giving a value of one to each. We then checked if the participants had actually understood. We decided to include three main categories for our analysis based on the native students' responses and their explanations.

1. The student participants did not understand what the EFL students said.
2. The student participants actually understood what the EFL students said despite errors involved.
3. The student participants said they understood but their explanations said the contrary.

In the next part three figures will follow. These figures show: participants' responses to the survey statements (Figure 1); the interpretation of the participants' responses concerning understanding (Figure 2); and the percentages of the statements understood by the participants in relation to the categories (Figure 3).

Figure 1 illustrates if the 22 participants understood or did not understand what the EFL students had said. We will focus on statements 1-14 (see Appendix 1).

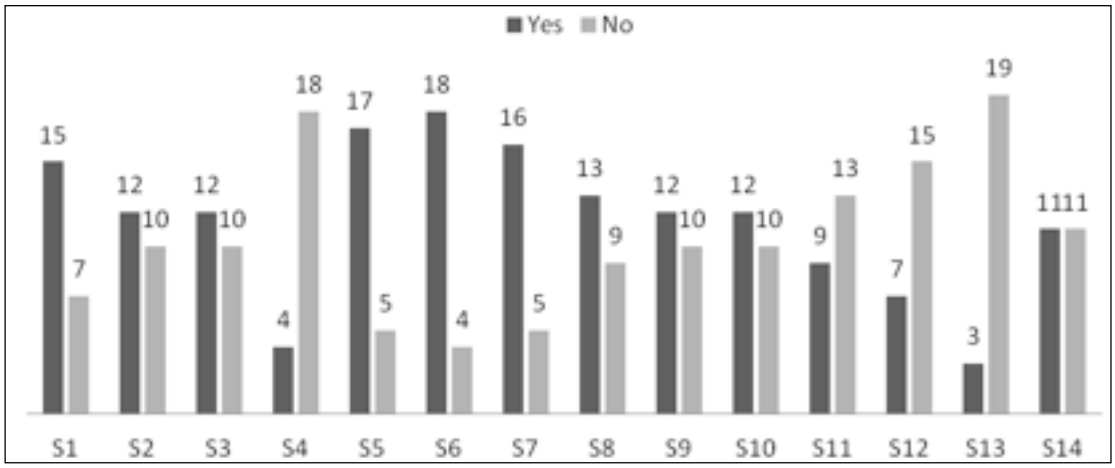

Figure 1: The participants' responses to the survey statements.

Figure 2 shows our interpretation of the students' degree of understanding the survey statements.

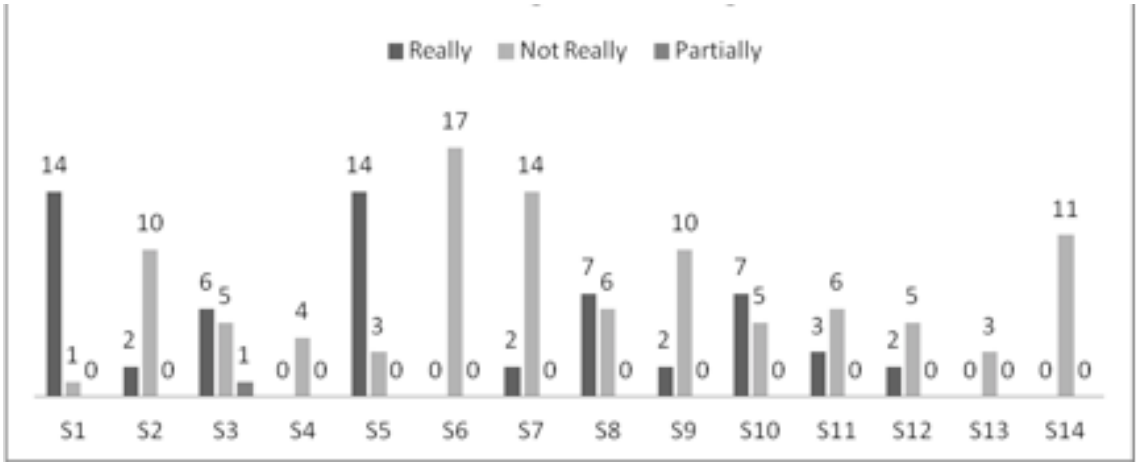

Figure 2: The interpretation of the participants' responses concerning understanding.

Finally concerning the three categories, Figure 3 shows the percentages of the statements understood by the participants.

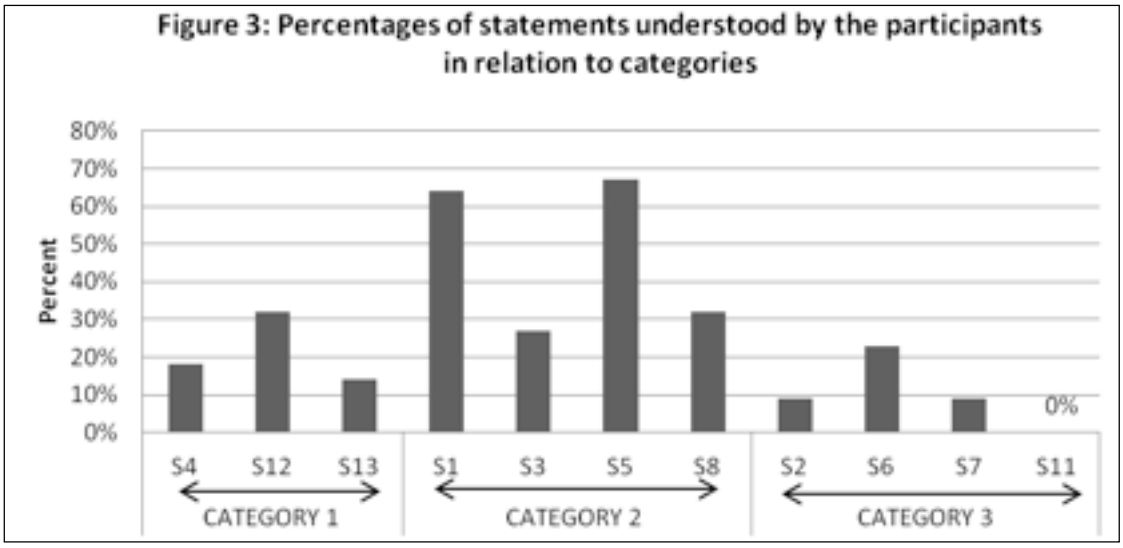

Figure 3: Percentages of statements understood by the participants in relation to categories.

At this point we will look specifically at each category and give the results that were found.

Category 1 The native student participants did not understand what the EFL students said

As can been seen from the data in Figure 1, concerning statement 4, 4 student participants out of 22 understood , and 18 did not. As for statement 12, 7 participants understood it and 15 did not. Similarly, regarding statement 13, 3 students understood and 19 did not. Figure 3 reveals that 18% understood statement 4; statement 12 was understood by 32% and statement 13 by 14%.

Category 2 The native student participants actually understood what the EFL students said despite errors involved

The data in Figure 1 indicates that out of 22 student participants, 15 students (68%) understood statement 1; for statement 3, 12 students (55

%) understood. Similarly, concerning statement 5, 17 students (77%) understood. As for statement 8, 13 students (59%) said they had understood the statement. The majority of the participants said that they had understood the four statements. The results correlate with our qualitative analysis since most of them actually understood the EFL students' statements. However, Figures 2 and 3 suggest that statement 1 was actually only understood by14 student participants (64%). Similarly, in statement 3, 6 students (27%) out of 12 understood it. In the same way, as for statement 5, 14 students (67%) understood it; finally concerning statement 8, 7 participants (32%) understood.

Category 3 The student participants said they understood but their explanations say the contrary

The data in Figure 1 shows that statement 2 had been understood by 12 students but 10 had not. However, Figure 2 suggests that only 2 had really understood, and 10 did not. Similarly, Figure 1 indicates that 18 students said they understood statement 6, but Figure 2 reveals that 17 did not actually understand. The data on statement 7 from Figure 1 demonstrates that 16 student participants understood, whereas Figure 2 reveals that 14 actually did not understand. One student did not answer the statement, so it was discarded. Finally, Figure 1 suggests that 11 students said they had understood statement 14 and 11 had not as opposed to Figure 2 showing that these 11 students did not understand the statement. Hence, Figure 3 indicates that only 2 students (9%) actually understood statement 2; concerning statement 6, 6 students (23%) understood; for statement 7, only 2 participants (9%) understood, and as for statement 14, nobody (0%) understood.

Qualitative Analysis of the Survey

In this section, we will discuss the errors, and provide examples of the comments made by the students in Mississippi, based on the items discussed in our quantitative analysis section.

We identified in our qualitative analysis the following type of errors in the EFL students' items:

1. Errors related to word choice. When analyzing each of the items, we also found grammatical errors that could have been categorized separately, but we did not classify them under this type because of the relevance of the error which consisted mainly in how a word could have been chosen more appropriately. The reason was that non-standard uses of grammatical features, such as asking questions without the auxiliary *do*, or having a singular third person subject disagreeing with its verb, can be accepted by most native speakers or fluent speakers of English from certain discourse communities or contexts. Such uses of the language are possible and may be considered inappropriate in contexts or by communities where a more standardized or prescriptive form of the language is more valued. Consequently, any of the items from our EFL students that we may categorize as grammatical errors were not found.
2. Errors related to the meaning of a word.

3. Errors related to the logical interchange of social conventions of politeness.
4. According to Villalobos' framework, this kind of error is an indicator of neither a lexical nor a syntactic stage, but of a semantic one (2008). The following is the analysis of the three types of errors.

Type 1 Errors

In the survey statement 1 - *The student make a question to the teacher*- the context involves a student asking the English instructor something s/he does not understand. First, the error lies in the use of the verb *to make* and its object *question*. In Spanish we say *hacer una pregunta*. On the other hand, the Standard English rule prescribes we use *ask a question*, so the verb *to make* does not collocate with the object noun *question* and this could cause confusion in the meaning. In addition, there is an error in subject-verb agreement. The rule of Standard English prescribes that when we have a subject in the third person singular, such as *the student*, the verb form must be *makes*. Despite the error, the student participants understood what the EFL students said by explaining *The student asked a question to the teacher*, or *The student is asking a question to the teacher.*

The following error is taken from statement 3 in the survey: *Can you repeat me?* The context involves a student in class who wants the instructor to repeat something that was not clear to him or her, or that s/he did not hear what the instructor had just said. The error is related to the object pronoun *me* (referring to the student) as the direct object of the sentence. The grammar rule prescribes that *we repeat something to somebody,* so the particle *to* is needed since the object pronoun should function in this case as an indirect object. We do not repeat somebody something. Even if we say something similar in Mexican Spanish, *¿Me puede repetir?,* we need a direct object, such as *la pregunta*, or the object pronoun *la* or *lo,* in order to complete the idea, and *me* would be the indirect object. Nevertheless, we may infer from context that the student wants the instructor to repeat something. Consequently, when one of the native speaker student participants was asked about statement 3 whether s/he understood or not, the explanation was: "*Can you say what I just said, or explain what I just said?."* Clearly, this student understood that the EFL student wanted the instructor to repeat something to him/her.

In the survey statement 5 is *He put an exam to the class*. The context here is an instructor administering an exam to the students. The error consists of word collocation. In other words, the Standard English collocation prescribes that the best combination of the noun *exam* could be either with the verb *to administer* or more informally *to give*. In Mexican Spanish, we would say *poner un examen* but in Standard English the verb *put* is not used. However, when one of the native speaker student participants was asked about this error in the survey, s/he said the following: "*He gave an exam to the class."* Once again, the native speaker student did understand what the EFL student intended to communicate.

The error is taken from statement 8 in the survey: *When we deliver the work?* The context is a student asking the instructor when the homework is due. The error is twofold. In the first place, the Standard English grammar prescribes that we need the auxiliary *do* with this type of interrogative

sentences. In the second place, the error has also to do with word collocation. The noun *work* does not combine with the verb *to deliver* except if the student is away and urgently needs to send the homework, so s/he may request the service of a courier to meet the deadline. Obviously, this is not usually the student's case. The best combination may be *to hand in* or *to turn in*. The misuse of the word may cause confusion in the meaning. However, when the native speaker students were asked about this example, some of the participants explained: "*When was the work given?"* It is clear that it was actually understood what the EFL student intended to ask.

Type 2 Errors

The following error from statement 2 in the survey is: *Teacher, I have a doubt*. The context involves Mexican EFL students in class who have a question about something. The error is a semantic error that can cause confusion to a native speaker. The Spanish word *duda* can be used in class to mean the student does not understand what the instructor has just said. However, the word *doubt* in English, if used in class, can probably mean you are not sure about what the instructor said or whether the instructor is saying something true or not true. In the survey, for instance, some of the native student speaker participants said they understood, but they gave the meaning in the explanation as not understanding: "*The person doubts the teacher."*

The next error taken from statement 4 is: *Tomorrow we have inscriptions at the Tec.* The context involves that every semester students have to sign up for courses. We identified three errors. The first one is the position of the adverb *tomorrow* which is normally placed at the end of the sentence. The second error consists of the word *inscriptions* which is *inscripciones* in Mexican Spanish. A false cognate is causing confusion in the meaning. The noun *inscriptions* in English is carved words on a wall with, perhaps, a chisel. The option in Standard English for this noun can be *enrollment* or *registration*. A third error is the meaning of the word *Tec* which is a social dialect, a word used locally within the school the students attend. Based on the data condensed in Figures 2 and 3, the native speaker students did not understand what the EFL students were trying to communicate.

In the survey statement 6 (*He has too many faults this semester.),* the context is a student saying that his/her classmate has too many absences since the absence limit is ten, so the classmate has exceeded the amount of absences. The Mexican Spanish plural word *faltas* in a context of a class can mean absences in English. If we translate literally the word *faltas* without taking into account the context, the English word will be *faults,* meaning someone caused something bad or did something wrong. The error is a semantic error. In the survey, the native speaker participants said they understood faults to mean mistakes, and not doing well: *"He has too many bad grades."* or *"He has too many problems."*

The following error is taken from statement 7 (*Do you want to revise your exam?).* The context is a student wants to go over her/his exam to see what the problem was. Usually, at the Mexican private university language instructors go over the answers with their students. The Spanish word used for this is *revisar,* and the literal translation in English is to *revise*, which is a false cognate. Most of the times, the word *revise* implies change in the

content of a text. As in the previous two examples, the error is a semantic error. In the survey, the students who said they had understood explained that the EFL students wanted to take the exam again or "*He's asking if he wants to change his exam."*

The last error found in this category is taken from statement 14: *We have vacations until May*. The student is talking about her/his vacation starting in May. The error is both grammatical and semantic. Standard English use does not normally accept the noun *vacation* in its plural form unless in the context of trips someone has taken the plural *vacations* is used, whereas in Mexican Spanish there is no other option but to use it as a plural noun. The semantic error consists of the use of the preposition *until* whose Spanish equivalent is *hasta*. The non-standard Mexican Spanish use of this preposition means *not before,* whereas the standard use in English means *something continues and then stops*. The native student participants who said they had understood thought that *We are on vacation right now and will be until May*. Interestingly, nobody commented there was something wrong about the plural form *vacations*.

Type 3 Errors

The first example of this type error is taken from statement 12: *I hope you don't catch a cold. Thanks, I hope so.* In a context when a person is coming down with a cold, you would normally wish that that person does not get sick, but the response to the wish means the opposite. In our daily interaction in this kind of situation we are polite. Nevertheless, these types of sentences are not normally the case. The error lies in the logical interchange of conventions of politeness in which you would reply that you would also wish that you will not catch a cold. Based on the data most of the students did not understand what the EFL students were saying.

The last example is taken from statement 13: *Then he asked his friend for his wife.* The context is again in the interchange of expressions of formality where somebody asks a married friend how his wife is. Although the sentence can be grammatically correct in another context, the error is found in the meaning. The sentence would need to be rephrased in order to avoid confusion. Otherwise, this error can cause an embarrassing situation. Most of the native speaker students did not understand this example.

Recommendations and Final Comments

The participants' interpretation about the errors categorized as type 1, such as those found in statements 3, 5 and 8, was that they had understood what was intended by the EFL students. We never found that their explanations could be categorized as understanding something different. Their comments to the answers revealed that they did not mind the grammatical errors involved. There was no indication in the participants' interpretation of any irritation at the EFL students' sentences. We can assume that in most real life situations, as long as the communication gets through, some listeners can be more sensitive or tolerant towards what a non-native speaker wants to communicate in spite of the fact that there may be errors involved in their sentences. This correlates to other previous studies on tolerance of errors in writing revealing that professors do not mind errors (Camps and Salsbury, 2008; Janoupolus, 1992), and tolerance

for errors made by non-native speakers' oral production (Hubbard et al., 1983; Piazza, 1980; Shaw, 1985).

The participants' interpretation regarding type 2 errors from the answers to statements 2, 4, 6, 7 and 14 in almost every case are the same as what the students in Mexico had been told that they were actually saying. The meaning in English is very different from what the Mexican students wanted to say, but the sentences "sounded correct", and so the students in Mississippi did not realize that there was a semantic problem. In our opinion, this is really one of the most serious types of mistakes, since native speakers think they understand, but they understand something very different from what the student in Mexico was trying to say. Similarly, it was the case of type 3 errors, such as those found in statements 12 and 13. It is clear that these errors were definitely not understood by the participants in Mississippi. The error consisted of engaging in a conversation where you are expected to respond with conventions of formality in a logical way.

Tolerance of errors may be shown in diverse contexts as long as the receiver understands. At a party, for instance, there can be a lot of non-comprehension without any serious consequences. However, there may be other situations where the tolerance may be little. For example, at a job interview in English, if a student makes type 2 or type 3 errors, and perhaps even type 1 error, the employer may decide to hire another candidate who does not commit *any* type of error simply because it may be more prestigious and advantageous to hire somebody with a better command of the language. In the discussion of a business contract, there must be a high level of comprehension and clarity. Error free utterances or sentences become highly valued.

English language instructors in a non-English speaking country frequently become accustomed to commonly repeated errors. They understand the students and do not realize that something is wrong. As instructors we should then provide feedback on any type of error when we deem it necessary by promoting awareness that in some contexts a certain type of language use or variation is more prestigious than the one they may know and in some others correctness and appropriateness are extremely important. Lastly, we need to emphasize formulaic expressions of formality in a given context. It is also important to handle certain grammatical structures used specifically in certain situations. Hulstijn (1989) suggested that setting, task and task requirements affect the degree of attention given to both formality and context.

Teachers can also have a list of the most common and frequent errors the students make and dedicate part of class to showing the appropriate use in context. They can have class activities and exercises in which the students can be asked to write the most appropriate and accepted variation for standard use. The activities and exercises can be oral or written depending on the need and size of the class. This should be done as frequently as possible so that the students can understand and put into practice the best options.

Obviously, these events do not happen in isolation. We make use of the language with the purpose of expressing something with the appropriate usage in a specific context and purpose. The way we employ it becomes

relevant in order to have enough knowledge of the diversity or variations and the differences each language can have. These elements should be taken into account when teaching a foreign language. Regretfully, any textbook series or even the instructor may overlook them and not fully provide enough social context of how language is used in specific situations or in this case how to address a university instructor. English instructors must be made more aware of this problem so they will take it into account in their teaching. While working on activities designed to develop skills in what Villalobos (2008) calls the "semantic stage", we should also bear in mind that foreign language learning is a process; therefore, attention should also be paid to the other stages in our students' interlanguage. All of this leads to the conclusion that more attention must be paid to the semantic problems that students have, but attention must also be paid to any possible grammatical or even lexical error.

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Appendix 1
Survey given to the participants

Read the sentences related to how Mexican students of English use them in the classroom, and indicate if you understand them or you don't understand them. If you understand them, explain what you understand:

1. The student make a question to the teacher.
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain what you understand.
2. Teacher, I have a doubt.
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain.
3. Can you repeat me?
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain.
4. Tomorrow we have inscriptions in the TEC.
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain.
5. He put an exam to the class.
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain.
6. He has too many faults this semester.
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain.
7. Do you want to revise your exam?
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain.
8. When we deliver the work?
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain.
9. I saw my career director.
   YES NO
   If yes, please explain.
10. When I finish my major...
    YES NO
    If yes, please explain.
11. How do you call a chair in English?
    YES NO
    If yes, please explain.
12. I hope you don't catch cold. Thanks, I hope so.
    YES NO
    If yes, please explain.
13. Then he asked his friend for his wife.
    YES NO
    If yes, please explain.
14. We have vacations until May.
    YES NO
    If yes, please explain.