



# Errors and students' insights on L2 writing: analysis of A1 English adult learners<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The present study focuses on the analysis of the texts written by students of an A1 English Course. Errors are classified according to linguistics aspects and analyzed to identify their source. Students were interviewed to inquire about their insights on errors and the writing process. Results showed a mismatch between the actual sources of errors and the students' attributed cause. The theoretical framework was based on different authors who described the writing process, error and correction and learning strategies. Based on the works of these authors, categories of analysis on error source, and strategies in the process of learning a new language were stated.

**Key words:** difficulties; writing process; error and correction; learning strategies.

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## Resumen

### **Errores y percepciones de los estudiantes sobre la producción escrita: un análisis de aprendices adultos de inglés A1**

El presente estudio se enfoca en el análisis de la producción escrita de estudiantes de un curso de A1 de inglés. El objetivo principal de este estudio fue el análisis de los errores de los estudiantes al producir textos escritos. Los errores fueron categorizados teniendo en cuenta aspectos lingüísticos y su análisis para encontrar la fuente de ellos. Los estudiantes fueron entrevistados para consultar sus apreciaciones sobre los errores y el proceso de escritura. El análisis mostró que los resultados son diferentes a lo que piensan los estudiantes sobre éstos. Para el marco teórico se tomaron como base los planteamientos de diferentes autores que describen el proceso de escritura, el error y corrección y las estrategias de aprendizaje, las teorías que permitieron establecer las categorías para el análisis de la causa del error y las estrategias en el proceso de aprendizaje de una nueva lengua.

**Palabras clave:** dificultades; proceso de escritura; error y corrección; estrategias de aprendizaje.

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## Résumé

### **Erreurs et perceptions des étudiants sur la production écrite : une analyse d'apprenants adultes d'anglais A1**

La présente étude porte sur l'analyse de la production écrite d'étudiants dans un cours d'anglais A1. L'objectif principal de cette étude était l'analyse des erreurs commises par les étudiants lors de la production de textes écrits. Les erreurs ont été classées en tenant compte des aspects linguistiques et de leur analyse pour en trouver la source. Les étudiants ont été interrogés pour consulter leurs opinions sur les erreurs et le processus de rédaction. L'analyse a montré que les résultats diffèrent de ce que les étudiants en pensent. Les approches de différents auteurs ont été pris en compte pour le cadre théorique. Ces auteurs décrivent le processus d'écriture, les stratégies d'erreur et de correction et d'apprentissage, ainsi que les théories permettant d'établir les catégories pour l'analyse de la cause de l'erreur et les stratégies d'apprentissage d'une nouvelle langue.

**Mots-clés :** difficultés ; processus d'écriture : erreur et correction ; stratégies d'apprentissage.

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing production is an important aspect of the process of learning a second language. It is part of the teaching of English and it is a difficult experience for the students because it requires the time of exposure and motivation to reach a well-written text. Relevant descriptions are given by Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, and Brown and Hood (as cited in Nunan, 1991). They describe the written production as a complex process that requires preparation, drafting and revising where the intention to write is minimum and few people feel free with a writing task when under observation of the teacher. Students need time to write, they need to be rehearsed and develop the written skill.

This skill is often used as an evaluation of more than a process of learning. Grabe and Kaplan (as cited in Al-Gharabally, 2015) stated that it is important for learners to raise their awareness about the importance of writing as a means of expression and communication and a way to gather information. It is the responsibility of teachers to change these possible insights and turn them into a new time where students see English productions as a useful tool in their lives and not as a way to make mistakes and producing communicative paragraphs starting in classes.

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Students that start the university have a low level of grammar knowledge which is demonstrated through the final test. Students placed in A1 begin the level with a reduced acquaintance of syntactic formation. At this point, the situation can be managed because they just start the development of the respective courses. Having a complete process where students are guided to write and correct themselves, they still may have difficulties producing a communicative paragraph in tests, distinct from what happens while class sessions.

The present study concerns the errors students made in their written production, as the general objective, the research seeks an analysis of students' written errors and why they make them in the final evaluation. It is made an assessment of their production to categorize the errors in the final exams and students' insights as well as the process of learning. Writing production is developed along the course including oral production and expression causing that students do not develop them completely at their level. To analyze the errors and students' insights it was necessary to categorize them using different linguistic concepts, writing stages, and learning strategies. The interest of the study comes from the persistent difficulties of students in the writing skills although the classes consider the practice of all the skills as well as the importance of knowing what the specific errors are and their cause. Initial problems are identified from the results of previous years.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Error and correction

Corder (1967) establishes a difference between 'mistake' and 'error' adding the concept of systematic. He argues that there are errors that may be random. Now, there is an opposition between systematic and non-systematic important for the distinction of mistake and error. Applying the statements by Glen (2016), he defines the random -unsystematic- errors as those which are unpredictable and can't be replicated and the systematic errors as consistent errors. Errors that occurred by memory lapses, physical states, such as tiredness and psychological conditions such as strong emotion are part of linguist performance and do not reflect a defect in our knowledge of our own language. The errors of performance states Corder (1967), will be unsystematic and the error of competence, systematic. Mistakes are related to the performance and errors are related to competence.

Bartram and Walton (1991) provide a definition of a mistake as something that they have learned is not put in practice and error is defined as the idea of getting wrong a completely new concept. They introduce the concept of "slip" defined as a wrong language caused by carelessness, nerves, etc... the kind of mistake that anybody could make.

As a conclusion for this attempt to get a strong definition and difference of mistake and error, we summarize these two concepts to ease the future analysis: **An error** is a consistent deviation of a linguistic code showing the failure in the competence of the writer. **A mistake** is the use of a wrong linguistic code that is not repetitive in the writing production showing the performance of the writer.

### Types of error

An attempt to distinguish communicative errors from non-communicative errors has been made. Hendrickson (1978) and references within, classified errors in two categories: **global error** is the communicative error that causes misinterpretation of a written message considering it as incomprehensible with the textual content of the error. A **local error** is a linguistic error that makes a form or structure in a sentence appear awkward but, nevertheless, causes a little or no difficulty in understanding the intended meaning of a sentence. According to him, it was found that most of the global errors resulted from inadequate lexical knowledge, misuse of prepositions and pronouns, and seriously misspelled lexical items. Most local errors are caused by misuse and omission of prepositions, lack of subject-verb agreement, misspelled words, and faulty lexical choice.

In the analysis by Sermsook, Liamnimitr and Pochakorn (2017) are proposed five categories of errors which include **grammatical errors** where are included specific concepts of grammar as adjectives, adverbs, articles, nouns, possession, pronouns, prepositions and verbs. **Substance errors** including capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. **Lexical errors** included word formation and word selection – In the word selection, it will be included the grammatical errors because of their possible wrong choice. **Syntactic errors** that mean the order of words and structure of a sentence and **semantic errors** that are ambiguous communication and miscommunication, stating that these errors are part of the coherence and cohesion.

In the book by Azar (1992), it is stated a guide for correcting writing errors describing the categories of errors. The categories are:

Singular plural (He have/he has), word form (beauty picture/beautiful picture), word choice (got on the car/got into the car), Add a word (I want go/I want to go), omit a word (She entered to the university/She entered the university), word order (I saw five times the movie/I saw the movie five times), incomplete sentence (I went to bed. Because I was tired/I went to bed because I was tired), Spelling (an accident occured/an accident occurred), punctuation (What did he say/what did he say?), capitalization (I am studying english/I am studying English), article (I had a accident/I had an accident) – to his error is important to add the previous explanation of using the different articles (defining and non-defining) because the wrong use of them causes an error -, meaning not clear (He borrowed some smoke/ ???) – From this category of error it is necessary to have a clear explanation of cohesion and coherence given above-, run-on sentence (my roommate was sleeping, we didn't want to wake her up/my roommate was sleeping. We didn't want to wake her up). A run-on sentence occurs when two sentences are incorrectly connected: the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next sentence are not properly marked by a period and a capital letter.

To ease the categorization of errors according to its nature. The Table 1 establishes the organization of the information presented previously.

**Table 1.** Global errors, local errors and grammatical aspects

GLOBAL ERRORS	LOCAL ERRORS	Grammatical aspects
<b>Semantic</b>	<b>Substance</b>	Nouns
Coherence and cohesion	Capitalization	Verbs
	punctuation	Prepositions
<b>Syntactic</b>	Spelling	adjectives
word order		Possessives
Omit a word	<b>Lexical</b>	
add a word	word choice	
	singular plural (S-V)	

### Source of errors

Sermsook *et al.* (2017) state that Error Analysis has been interest from a number of scholars in the field of second language acquisition. They make a revision of some Error Analysis definitions claiming that it is the method that helps to reveal the strategies used by learners to learn a language, also it assists teachers as well as other concerning people to know what difficulties learners encounter in order to improve their teaching. The analysis requires a comparison of what students learned and what they lack. It also provides an explanation in order to reduce the errors of students.

Richards (1970) describes the errors that are not concerned with the interference of the mother tongue. Intralingual or developmental errors provide an explanation of the level of a learner in a specific moment related to the structure of English. Developmental or intralingual errors are the hypothesis made by students on the language due to the experience of it. They are divided into groups regarding the characteristics of rules.

These kinds of errors are divided into different groups. (1) **Over-generalization**: defines how students apply already learned rules to other new situations based on their experience with previous ones, it involves the creation of

one inaccurately rule instead of two different rules. Examples about the use of “s” in regular plurals or the ending “-ed” in every verb are included in this group. (2) **Ignorance of rule restrictions:** refers to the application of rules to the context where they do not apply. This application is derived from an analogy. For instance, a particular preposition before a verb and its use with verbs that don’t accept it. (3) **Incomplete application of rules:** defines the failure of students when using complete rules. The degree of development is not acceptable to produce utterances. One example is the structure of questions. The use of auxiliaries in the simple present tense: “You go to the park?” Instead of “Do you go to the park?” (4) **False concepts hypothesized:** learners can fall into an incorrect conceptualization due to a lack of comprehension among the distinct elements of language. For example, the verb “is” could be considered as a mark of the simple present tense which may cause its use in every sentence of that tense: Carlos is works in a company.

416 The interlingual category is described by Corder (as cited in Sari, 2016). It is described as an interference with the mother tongue. Interlingual errors are caused when the learners prevent to acquire the rules of a second language. Kaweera (2013) in the study makes a detailed revision of the interlingual interference naming three aspects: (1) **lexical interference:** learners make errors on syntax, lexis, morphology, and orthography. Two semantic errors are described based on lexis: the confusion of sense relation which is related to a wrong meaning used by learners. For example, the use of “touch the guitar” instead of “play the guitar”. The collocational error which is related to an unnecessary placement of words in a sentence. For example, the use of “to” in the phrase “near to my house”. (2) **Syntactic interference:** learners use the mother tongue to translate directly to the target language. These errors imply subject-verb agreement, wrong structure, and difficulties with word order. (3) **Discourse interference:** written production is influenced by oral, culture and social values. This interference is based on the idea that learners do not write paragraphs in their production. According to the studies cited by Kaweera (2013), there is not an evident production in the mother tongue causing difficulties on what is expected in the target language.

## Correction

Correction is important in the process of writing because providing feedback to students in their production is crucial to overcoming difficulties. As mention above, the teacher is one in charge of it considering the motivation along the exposure to the language. The method applied by teachers is something that students need to adequate to. Regarding the correction, Tennant (as cited in Al-Buainain, 2009), used two methods for editing/correcting students writing: (1) to write corrections on the paper, using a red pen to make them clearly visible;



However, according to Al-Gharabally (2015), the excess of this method causes anxiety and frustration on students. Instead of that, teachers should focus on errors causing more difficulties to the reader. (2) And "more effective method", to write lengthy comments explaining grammar points, raising questions concerning the meaning and logical development, suggesting alternative wording, and reorganizing text.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The research was focused on a natural context, with specific needs where students were observed. The study was arranged on a qualitative paradigm due to the specific need to recognize the interaction of students with the written language, the relation created among them. Understanding the process by using observation, interview, and artefact analysis to further examination of data; through careful observation, informed questioning, and detailed data gathering, qualitative research offers evidence of learning (Kozleski, 2017).

First, it is necessary to identify the results of students from the very first exam that it is applied when registering in the university. On the basis of these results, selection of population is made considering the students with the lowest grades in general communicative grammar. Then, to implement different structured activities during classes to get students close to the language.

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### **Population**

The participants of this study were selected from the courses starting the A1 English level. They were selected as volunteers in the process allowing to gather the information provided in their written production and the interviews applied. They contribute with significant information regarding the objectives of the present study. A total of nine students participated in the study.

### **Data and instruments**

In order to obtain information to be able to respond to this study, it was necessary to gather data through the instruments.

### *Proficiency test (diagnostic test)*

It is the initial test every student registered on a program of the University Santiago de Cali has to take during his/her scholar process. The level of English is assigned according to the results obtained in the diagnostic test. This instrument helps the study with global information of errors made by students providing a general idea about the initial difficulties of students.

### *Grid of evaluation*

Criteria were established to assess the production of students. This instrument helped to identify the errors in syntax by students. The grid of evaluation was adapted from the official grid stipulated by the language institute. The instrument was used in every written production to monitor the process of writing.

### *Interview*

418 The third instrument to gather information was the semi-structured interview. It allowed the study to obtain specific information about the insights of students, it is implemented after building a good relationship teacher-student to ensure that data is certain and meaningful to further analysis. It was applied in the mother tongue of students allowing to gather information easier. There were 10 questions of the basis for every student, extra questions will be followed depending on the answers provided by students. It aimed at gathering as many specific details as possible.

### *Grounded theory*

The final instrument was used over the whole study, it enables to make sure the lesson plans were designed considering the written production as an important part. It also permitted to provide possible information about errors that are significant when the analysis is made. Categories of errors were considered based on grammar theory mentioned above in *types of errors*.

## RESULTS

The assessment of the production by students resulted in a total of 254 errors. As the first specific objective requires, the evaluation of written errors allowed to categorize them in 9 grammatical errors.

The study aligns with the ideas developed by different authors (Hendrickson, 1978; Sermsook *et al.*, 2017). Errors were divided into two general groups: global and local errors. Table 2 allowed the compliance of the first specific objective showing the division in four subcategories which contain different errors found in the written production students made. In each subcategory of errors, there is one specific category which was analyzed to find its source. With the highest total of errors, substance group (105) includes punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. Syntactic group (88) includes Omit a word, word order and add a word. Lexical group (51) has word choice and singular-plural (subject-verb agreement) errors and with the lowest quantity of errors, the semantic group (10) with coherence and cohesion. The Table 2 shows the global quantity of errors made: word choice (15%) with a total of 39 errors, 33 errors of spelling (13%), in omit a word (29%) 73 errors were found, eight errors of add a word (3%), errors of punctuation (20%) were 52, capitalization errors (8%) 21 errors were found, errors of singular-plural (5%)– subject-verb agreement – were 13, in word order (3%) were found eight and errors of coherence and cohesion (4%) were ten. They will be analyzed to reach the general objective and find the reasons why students made mistakes, the source of the errors will be found.

**Table 2.** Categories and types of errors

Categories of errors		Source of error		Grammatical aspects	Number of errors	%	Total	%	
Global	Semantic	Coherence and cohesion	intralingual	Incomplete application of rules	Sentential level	10	4%	10	4%
	syntactic	Omit a word	interlingual	syntactic interference	pronouns, prepositions, articles	73	29%	85	35%
			intralingual	incomplete application of rules, false concepts hypothesized	verbs, prepositions, articles				
add a word	intralingual	overgeneralization, false concepts hypothesized, incomplete	verb "I like is the park"	7	3%				

				application of rules					
		word order	interlingual	syntactic interference	adjective-noun	5	3%		
			intralingual	overgeneralization	adverb-noun				
local	substance	capitalization	interlingual	discourse interference	little production	21	8%	105	41%
		punctuation	interlingual	discourse interference	little production	52	20%		
			intralingual	False concepts hypothesized	apostrophe "dog's"				
	spelling	interlingual	lexical interference	Confortable	32	13%			
	lexical	word choice	interlingual	syntactic interference	Possessive	38	15%	51	20%
			intralingual	overgeneralization	prepositions, nouns, verbs				
		subject-verb agreement	interlingual	syntactic interference	Quantity "there is/are"	13	5%		

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In order to reach the second specific objective, an interview was applied to categorize students' thoughts about their process and errors. It is evident that there is a big difference between what students think and what their real errors are. While they think about coherence and cohesion as one of the most difficult aspects in the written production, the results of the tests show that it is the problem with the lowest percentage (1%) in the total of paragraphs. The same situation happens with subject-verb agreement, students consider that they have most of the difficulties when they have to conjugate correctly. Although the problem is present, it signifies just 3% in the total of categories.

One category that is almost with the same percentage is "Omit a word". Students' thoughts and results of tests are similar; therefore, this difficulty is identified by students which implies that it might be easy to overcome if there is a good practice on writing. However, it is necessary to reflect on the following question: Why if they identify this problem, it is the category with most of the errors in the total of exams?

The categories "Word choice", "Spelling" and "Capitalization" have almost the same percentages, students are aware of them in a very low percentage, but

they still happen in their productions. In Capitalization, there is just 4% a difference in the results; thus, students know they make the mistake but still let it happen. Without considering some exceptions from the L1 to the L2, rules on capitalization are almost the same to be applied in writing.

For "Add a Word" and "Word Order" the percentages are low which means that although are present, it may be easily practiced so students overcome it. However, regarding "Punctuation" the situation is different considering that it is the second category with the highest percentage of mistakes made in the tests. Students do not consider punctuation as an important aspect to express ideas correctly which is a problem they are not aware of.

### **Students' insights**

Students' answers provide information about the source of the error in a sense related to the intralingual interference. One of the questions in the interview was "Why do you think you make a mistake?" Answers were classified into two categories: L1 interference and affective factors.

#### *L1 interference*

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Four students mentioned the interference with the mother tongue as a difficulty in the written production. Thus, interlingual problems are present in the process of writing, students ideas were "*es inevitable uno siempre pensar en español pues porque es la lengua de uno*" or "*escribo como cuando hablo en español*". It can be inferred that a syntactic interference exists in the production of students because it seems that students translate directly from Spanish. From the example "*hasta en el español comete este tipo de errores*", it can be inferred that the source of the error is a discourse interference considering the idea that students do not have the habit to produce paragraphs in their written production.

#### *Affective factors*

Along the interview students were asked why they kept making mistakes to which they considered some factors as anxiety towards the task, lack of attention and practice. "*es por mi falta de atención en el momento*", students' awareness when writing is not complete. For example, one student answer was "*Porque de pronto escribo muy rápido, o sea y no me concentro como bien*" which implies that students do not take the time to revise what they are writing at the moment having as a result developmental errors like the incomplete application of rules.

## DISCUSSION

Similar studies have been developed in order to understand the source(s) of students' errors in the process of producing written texts. Three different investigations will be analyzed in this section.

The research conducted by Castillo and Londoño (2016) examined the attitudes of the students towards error correction in their EFL language process using a survey in which their perceptions towards the error correction were gathered and on how they preferred being corrected. The authors found a relationship between the error correction and the reduction of it by expanding, changing and deepening on positive feedback. This study has a direct relationship with the present research since both investigations focused on error and error correction and the students' attitudes. The results in both studies suggest that positive feedback generates better results in the students' written production.

Another study that shows similar results is the one developed by Fareed, Ashraf and Bilal (2016), in Pakistan, entitled: "ESL Learners' Writing Skills: Problems, Factors, and Suggestions". The main objective of this investigation was to understand Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' factors that hinder their writing skills.

The findings revealed that the major problems in Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing were insufficient linguistic proficiency (including command over grammar, syntax, and vocabulary), writing anxiety, lack of ideas, reliance on L1 and weak structure organization. Some of these problems can be evidenced in Colombian students since the present study showed that a lot of errors belong to the poor command of grammar rules, syntax and lack of vocabulary. Pakistani students and Colombian students make similar mistakes in subject-verb agreement, pronouns, tenses, articles, prepositions, and basic sentence structures. The overall result of the writing samples had several difficulties in grammar, including vocabulary, pronouns, articles, prepositions, and structures. Both studies also identified cultural aspects in the written production, as well as Ahmed (cited by Fareed *et al.*, 2016). Motivation aspects found in a study conducted by Nik, Sani, Kamaruzaman and Hasbollah (cited by Fareed *et al.*, 2016), students just seem to be not motivated to improve their writing skills.

Finally, the third investigation confronted with the present study entitled: "Interlingual errors and Intralingual errors found in a narrative text written by EFL students in Lampung" developed by Sari (2016), demonstrates that errors are considered as an aspect of memory and emotional strain. Interlingual errors were also classified in diverse groups considering the background given by Azar (1992): having wrong spelling, the use of L1 and omission, addition, wrong choice of

words. What makes difference between the present study and Sari (2016) was the categorization in bigger concepts of these groups of errors following the ideas of James (as cited in Sermsook *et al.*, 2017) in the analysis by Sermsook *et al.* (2017): grammatical errors, Substance errors, Lexical errors, Syntactic errors, and semantic errors providing thus a much clearer taxonomy on the type of errors. The sources of intralingual errors were based on the theory brought by Richards (1970): overgeneralization, false concept hypothesis and incomplete application of the rule. The importance of this research relies on the classification of the errors made and its analysis to identify its source. A similar analysis of the errors and their source was also made in the present study identifying also the source of errors based on the theories making possible to consider that learners of English sometimes make the same mistakes without considering the native language and their provenience.

This investigation made an analysis and categorization of errors and students' perceptions towards them, nevertheless, there are other aspects in the written production to be researched. For further research, the following issues can be considered:

- Affective factors are important to be increased in the process of writing. Thus, making research on strategies that motivate students to regulate emotions to achieve better results is a relevant aspect for their communicative performance.
- There are different systems to correct students' production, an analysis of their impact on students' production would allow identifying other categories of students' attitudes toward the process and the errors.
- The initial categorization of errors presented in this study opens the opportunity for teachers to research on each error and the possibility to reduce them.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the present study, one general objective was stated in order to classify the errors in the written production of 11 students of English 1 at Santiago de Cali University. Through the analysis of the different instruments, it was possible to identify the total of errors in the current situation of the investigation and the source of them.

Regarding the research question that asked about why students still present difficulties, it was possible to identify the cause of the errors. It was found that each error had its own cause and some subcategorization in each category also had different errors. In general, students still show an evident interference with

Spanish; in terms of structure -syntax-, students write in some cases using sentences as in Spanish. There is also a lack of practice in the mother tongue that interferes in the production of the target language. It was concluded that students do not have the habit to write in the mother tongue causing that they do not pay attention when producing in English. It was also identified that there were developmental errors as a result of time exposure to the language, students do not internalize the rules completely making difficult to write 100% correct expressions.

Students show more difficulties on different aspects of writing skills. Comparing the errors assessed and the students' insights, made possible to find that the errors they identified are different from the real ones, concluding that grammatical competence difficulties of students are different from what they think.

From the classification and analysis of the interviews, it was possible to find attitudes on students toward the error. Most of the students consider the error as a negative aspect in the process of learning increasing their frustration, anxiety, and anger in the moment of writing. Students do not see the error as an aspect to overcome since they prefer to erase the error when it is corrected. Thus, students do not have cognitive strategies to identify their errors at 100% as well as affective strategies to regulate their emotions in order to concentrate on their tasks.

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It was also observed that students consider the teacher as the first model during the classes to get information about the target language and a good correction of the production. Students see the teacher as an assessor in the process that will provide the necessary to achieve good production. It is possible to conclude that good management in the process will reduce the percentage of error in the students making possible a readable paragraph, it is necessary to make adjustments in the way that error correction is provided so students feel motivated to learn a new language. Regarding the system of correction, it was positive due to the significance given by students to the idea that it leads them to think and be aware of linguistics aspects they have to consider in the development of their skills.

The general results and findings are a good to apply a system of correction where students develop awareness in their own process of writing motivating the learning of a new language, reducing their errors in order to improve their communicative competence.



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