

# Helping bells ring: fostering reflection on the mistakes learners make<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

Advanced learners of a foreign language are known to find a number of difficulties not only with respect to accuracy but also phraseologically. They seem to reach a plateau from which it is hard to spring to higher levels of proficiency, which Long (2003) refers to as “a general non-nativelike attainment”. Second language studies have proved there comes a point in foreign language learning when learners seem unable to overcome the obstacles their own performance errors pose to their linguistic development. Adult learners in particular claim they “know” that what they have written is a mistake but only once it has been pointed out by teachers in the feedback do they become aware of it.

This phenomenon is not unfamiliar to students at Facultad de Lenguas. In order to address this problem and to help them develop self-reflection and autonomy, teachers of English IV during 2011 encouraged learners to use an Individual Mistake Frequency Log (IMFL hereafter) (Ferris, 2002: 332), in which they were invited to record their mistakes, possible corrections and the reference book they might resort to so as to cope with these difficulties. Students were allowed to consult their IMFLs during in-class written assignments and exams.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of the IMFL on students' written work over time and thus ascertain the degree of grammar reflection learners engaged in, during the experience, as regards their performance in writing. To this effect, 105 written assignments by ten different students are analyzed to track the evolution of a number of specific mistakes, especially those that compromise written communication severely, namely, a) missing subjects, b) the absence of an obligatory determiner and c) incorrect verb patterns including passive participles and unaccusative structures. Likewise, we explore participants' answers to a written questionnaire on the use they made of the mistake logs and their role with respect to their learning process. In this paper we will present the analysis of the written assignments and the correlation between the mistakes present in these, those recorded individually in the IMFLs and learners' perceptions.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Studies of ultimate attainment (Coppieters 1987, Birdsong 1992, White and Genesee 1996; Johnson et al. 1996 and Sorace 1993) suggest contradictory results as to the differences between native and non-native norms in grammaticality judgement tasks (Sorace 2003: 132) and evidence points to difficulties for adult second language learners to reach an overall state of competence identical to that of monolingual speakers (Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson 2003: 578). The fact that adults continue to strive to overcome a number of obstacles in their language learning process has been documented widely and the reasons put forward for this phenomenon are related to both ages of onset and maturation periods. While it is widely accepted that “maturation can account for the overall

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and linear decline in learning potentials with increasing AOs (Ages of onset)", [...] the range of non-native L2 levels may be a function of social/psychological factors (Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson 2003: 574) . These factors might appear to play a major role with growing age.

The difference between ultimate attainment in child first language acquisition and adult second language acquisition for both processes is undisputable. For Long (2003), however, the principal underlying causes are "commonly, but not universally, held to be age of onset and/or a constellation of linguistic factors dealt with under the general rubric of "L1 transfer" (p. 519).

Many researchers have examined these differences and the causes for the distinct levels of ultimate attainment and many applied linguists have researched instruction types in search of methodological answers to this query, since "left to their own devices, adults rely not upon signals in the language in the input, but on their native-language-processing strategies". Adult processing mechanisms are no longer tuned to the details of the input so, in the case of second language instruction, engaging perceptual processes during implicit learning is more profitable than promoting metalinguistic awareness (Doughty 2003: 298).

In fact, it is essential to determine "how L2 learners' attention can most efficiently be directed to cues in the input which "disabled" adult learners fail to perceive when left to their own devices" (Doughty, 2003:288), as motivated by the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001) which states that "SLA is largely driven by what learners pay attention to and notice in target language input and what they understand the significance of noticed input to be" (p. 3-4). Considering that adults are no longer tuned to the input, *what* is noticed by them differs across individuals, and is probably less efficient as a general process. However, according to Schmidt (2001) and Robinson (1995, 2003), this initial step in the Noticing Hypothesis, involves merely "detection" of surface elements of instances of language.

Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) stress the importance not only of this initial step of leading learners to notice grammar and vocabulary forms through awareness-raising tasks but also of encouraging them to engage in what Hulstijn (2001: 270) calls *elaboration*, which involves diverse mental operations and a proactive approach to their own mistakes.

It is within this framework that we have structured the present study in order to contribute to our adult learners' development of this type of noticing process in combination with some form of elaboration required through the completion of the mistake frequency logs and teachers' feedback. It is precisely in this sense that we would like to help learners make their bells ring instead of waiting for them to do so of their own accord. We would like to find pedagogic ways of encouraging our learners to notice grammatical and meaning-oriented information in the input they receive, among which they will frequently encounter teachers' feedback. If this feedback can be put to use and learners can be guided in their making profit of this use, learners will count with one more tool to further their proficiency in the foreign language.

## **2. The study**

The study we carried out will be described in the following sections in terms of its objectives, the hypothesis formulated for this research, the context in which it was applied, the participants and the tasks they are regularly expected to complete as well as the data collection procedures.

### **2.1. Objectives**

The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of the IMFL on students' written work over time and thus ascertain the degree of grammar reflection learners engaged in during the experience, as regards their performance in writing.

### **2.2. Hypothesis**

It is our hypothesis that

- IMFLs will help students reflect upon their errors, which will not be repeated once students have noticed their mistakes and recorded them in their logs in subsequent written assignments.

### **2.3. Context**

This research was carried out with learners taking the subject English IV within the Teacher- and Translator-Training Programmes, Facultad de Lenguas (Universidad Nacional del Comahue) during 2011. The subject is taught 7 weekly hours throughout the whole year. The course places much emphasis on written production, especially on the development of essay-type assignments. These timed tasks are completed in class without recourse to reference materials. Throughout years, it has become evident that learners find it difficult to perceive their own mistakes, especially those related to syntax, in their own production during the editing phase. To offer them assistance with this issue, teachers of the course have introduced what Ferris 2002 (p. 332) has called the Individual Mistake Frequency Log, where learners can record, once they have received feedback on their written production, those mistakes that recur in their production.

### **2.4. Participants**

Ten students taking the subject during 2011 accepted being part of this study and contributed their written tasks and their mistake logs for them to be analysed. These learners (all of them women) are about 20-23 years of age. Two out of the ten participants did not complete a mistake log and their written assignments are therefore taken as a baseline to be compared with the group of learners who kept a log. These participants also took courses taught in the fourth and fifth years of the programmes; three were teacher-trainees and seven, translator-trainees.

### **2.5. Writing tasks**

Learners taking English IV are required to write a fortnightly Language-In-Use Practical Assignment (LUPA) consisting of a) a reading task for which they are supposed to both answer 4 questions and paraphrase 4 expressions from the text and b) an essay-like argumentative piece of around 300 to 350 words. The texts on which the reading tasks are based are typically taken from different sections of the Guardian online or from other British newspapers of wide circulation. For the essay they are to write about a topic chosen from a set of around 7 or 8 options provided by the teachers. The topics offered are all related to the issues dealt with in the reading text and are presented as thesis-statements, where stances are either already marked or where learners can choose which position to adopt.

Some examples appear below:

- *Art is not free-of-charge*
- *Museums around the world should not own works of art*
- *In the audiovisual arts it is very difficult to credit sources*

During 2011, learners submitted eleven LUPAs, each of which was graded. Feedback was offered by the teachers in the shape of coded comments specifying the type of mistake that learners had made for them to revise, spot the mistake in them and correct. The topics of LUPAs during that year were related to each of the units taught, namely, consumerism, art and sight, music and urban living.

## **2.6. Data collection and analysis**

### **2.6.1. Written Assignments (WS)**

The data obtained consists in written assignments by participants, their mistake logs (wherever possible) and their answers to a questionnaire.

105 written assignments by ten different students are analyzed to track the evolution of a number of specific mistakes, especially those that compromise written communication severely, namely, a) missing subjects, b) double subjects, c) the absence of an obligatory determiner, d) incorrect use of the genitive case and e) incorrect verb patterns related to passive participles and unaccusative structures. Likewise, we explore students' answers to a written questionnaire on the use they made of the mistake logs and their role with respect to learners' learning process.

### **2.6.2. Individual Mistake Frequency Logs (IMFLs)**

At the beginning of the course learners were presented with a form for them to fill in with the typical mistakes they encountered in the feedback provided by teachers with respect to their written production. The form consisted of five columns for learners to record a) the source where the mistake was made, i.e. which LUPA; b) the type of mistake according to the code the teacher had provided, c) the mistake itself, d) how to correct it /the correct version and e) grammar reference books consulted

or to consult to solve the issue in question. At the bottom of the page a list of reference books was provided for learners to refer to and consult in case of doubt (See Appendix A).

Learners were encouraged to use these IMFLs not only for them to analyse their production in search of patterns but also to notice and be involved in the solution of syntactic problem areas. Learners were instructed to make free use of their logs and consider them as diaries of the problems they encountered when writing.

### 2.6.3. Questionnaires

English IV students were invited to answer an online questionnaire about IMFLs and the ways in which they usually deal with mistakes in their LUPAs, using the forms' tool in Google Docs. The questionnaire consisted of seven questions:

1. What do you do about the mistakes you have made in your LUPAs / exams once these assignments have been corrected by the teachers?
2. Do you usually keep a record of your mistakes? How? Why?
3. Did you use the IMFL during 2011? Why? Why not?
4. Was the log useful for you? Why? why not?
5. Was keeping a record of your mistakes in your logs practical?
6. Do you consider that keeping a record of your mistakes in your log helped you to improve your writing skill?
7. What changes would you make to the IMFL?

Nine forms were submitted; some of them written in Spanish and others in English.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. General results

#### 3.1.1. Error types

The following table (Table 1) provides a general overview of the mistakes that have been analysed, as well as the number of students who have detected them and recorded them on their logs:

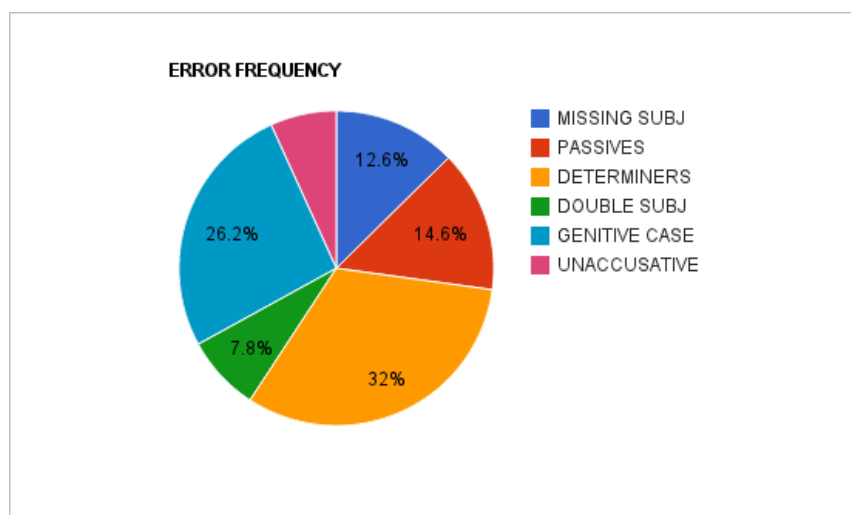
Error type	Number of students who have detected and recorded these errors
Missing subjects	2 (ST1 and ST7)
Double Subjects	0
Determiners	6 (ST1, ST2, ST3, ST5, ST7, ST9)
Genitive case	4 (ST1, ST3, ST5, ST7)

Passive Construction	2 (ST1 and ST5)
Verb Pattern: Unaccusative verbs	2 (ST5, ST7)

Table 1. Recording of mistake types per students

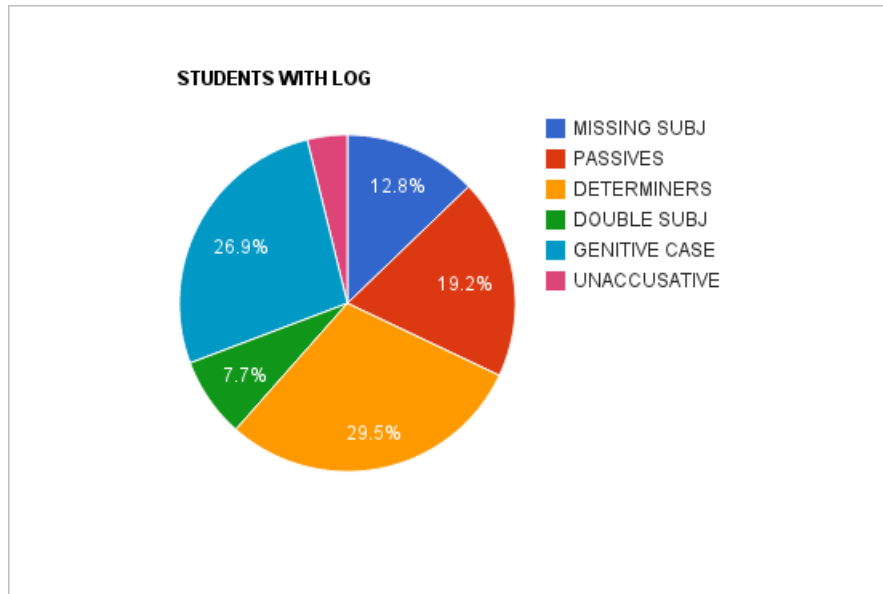
It can be noted that mistakes related to noun phrases (including those related to determiners and genitive case) are the ones on which most students have focused, while errors in sentence structure (such as missing/ double subjects and passives) have not been recorded by many of them.

The following graphs summarize general error frequency and its distribution in participants' logs:



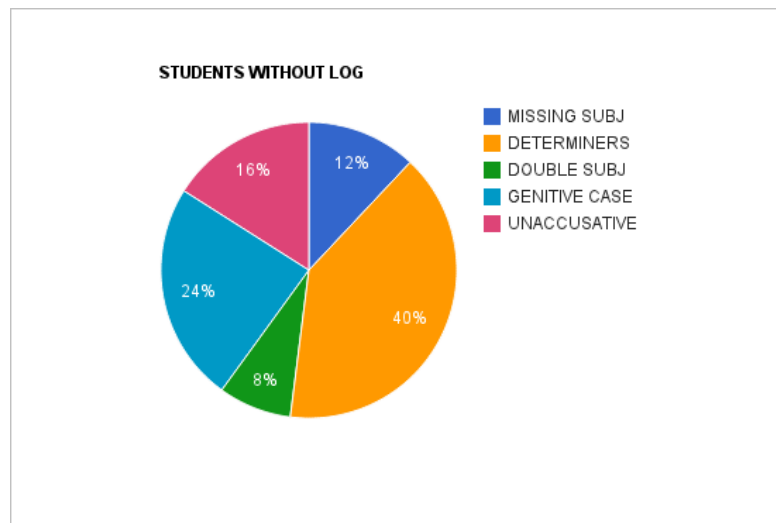
Graph 1: Error frequency in their written samples (WS)

As can be observed in this first graph, participants' mistakes are grouped mainly around the mistake type "Determiners", in almost the same proportion as that of the genitive case. The smallest percentages are those related to unaccusatives and double subjects. In Graph 2, the proportion of these mistake types is drawn for those learners who kept the log.



Graph 2: Distribution of mistake types across learners who kept a log

Although the distribution of mistakes is similar to that of Graph 1, in this case participants have paid more attention to and recorded more instances of determiners, the genitive and, unlike the previous case, an important percentage of incorrect passive constructions.



Graph 3: Distribution of mistake types for learners without a log

In this third graph, the distribution of only two participants' mistakes indicates that almost half the mistakes correspond to the category named "determiner", which is a constant in all three graphs. Unaccusative verb mistakes in this graph are larger in proportion than in the other two cases above, while errors in connection with the passive voice are non-existent in the data analysed. These two learners present a special behaviour which might be related to their lack of use of IMFLs.

Each student may have used teacher feedback in a different way and these factors point to individual differences that might be responsible for the heterogeneous results obtained by learners within the experimental group (with a log). Participants' data can be exploited to its fullest if analysed qualitatively to find out whether and to which extent IMFLs have been effective.

### 3.1.2. Description of mistakes found in the corpus

In the following paragraphs each mistake type will be described and reference will be made to the number of instances found in our corpus of 105 written assignments.

#### a- Missing Subjects

An analysis of the grammatical context of occurrence of this mistake type in our corpus indicates that this error has been made in

- **subordinate clauses** (modifiers): "the noise of forks and knives when ? are washed" (3 mistakes)
- **subordinate clauses** (complements): "The company which produces these "tops" claims that ?is just a piece of clothing" (1 mistake)
- **cases where subjects were preceded by adjuncts**: "In the expression "despite appearances", ?is implied that Boudou..." "As regards the aspects which are taking into account their behavior ? have to do with ..." (3 mistakes)
- **structures linked by a coordinating conjunction**: "It publishes **and** sells digital books on its site and now ? is also publishing..." ( 1 mistake)
- **focus structures**: "which show us how glamorous ? is to have a car", "They are focus on themselves that ? cannot think about...." (3 mistakes)
- **Others** (2 mistakes)

Phinney (1987) points out that most subject omissions in ESL learners (whose L1 is Spanish) occur in subordinate or co-joined clauses, "where the discourse was already focused on the subject" (p 234). This is exactly what happened to participants in our study, since all the obligatory subjects that are missing in our sample correspond to the theme that is being developed in their text (known/shared information). Subjects that describe new information (rheme) have not been omitted, a phenomenon similar to the one that takes place in our mother tongue.

Paradis and Navarro (2003) make a comparison between the different ways in which subjects are realized in Spanish and in English, which may explain some of the errors that have emerged in this



category. The following table characterises each language and summarizes the contrasts between them.

Spanish	English
pro-drop language	Non-pro-drop language
Rich morphology- Overt pronominal/lexical subjects determined by discourse/pragmatic context ( new vs. old information, contrast, emphasis)	Discourse/pragmatic context determines argument reduction through pronominalisation, not through omission.
SVO language	SVO language
Freer word order	More restricted word order
Subjects are related to the pragmatics/syntax interface	Subjects are related to the core inflectional layer.

Table 3: Comparison between Spanish and English

As it can be observed, the interplay of all these factors, especially the heavy weight of pragmatic factors causing subject omission in Spanish but not in English, might generate cross-linguistic influence that surfaces as a missing subject in students' texts, as anticipated in the literature review above.

### b- Double Subjects

This type of error has typically occurred as triggered by:

- **the use of it-clefts/wh-clefts** ("It is life that **it** is portrayed", "what **it** is enough in the expression "enough is enough" is the way the singer behaves") (3 mistakes)
- The use of "**One**" and "**former**": "and the last one **drawback** has to do with", "... the former **it** is cheap and it has been worn so as to attend a meeting". (2 mistakes)
- **Subject postmodification through relative clauses**: "Those boys and girls who listen to national rock music, **they** tend to be aware of..." "the case of many people who were thought to .... but when facing the ugly truth, **they** were in fact, empty and depressed" (2 mistakes)

As regards the possible causes of this mistake, much has been written about subject omission (predictably due to the different settings of the pro-drop parameter in English and Spanish) but not about double subjects. Similar situations, such as the appearance of the "is-comodín" (Liceras, 2007) at the early stages of L2 (English) learning, have been explained as a result of the cross-linguistic influence of one language over the other, in terms of rules and structures (e.g.: "The boys is no have it"). Learners feel that certain positions have to be filled with an overt element as a result of the

interplay between the rules of their L1 and the L2 in their interlanguage. This same explanation could apply to double subjects in cleft sentences, but further research is needed.

Word category and heavy complements or modifiers between the head N and the verb with which the N agrees may also lead to the emergence of double subjects. Learners at advanced stages in their L2 proficiency seem to lose track of the subject and its post-modification and, when they coordinate predicates within the clause, they are compelled to include another subject.

### c- Incorrect use of determiners

Errors that belong to this category are associated with:

- **Generic reference**, involving the use of the definite determiner with plural nouns (“the online markets”, “the romance e-books”, “the perfect lives”) or with uncountable nouns (“the marketing”) (18 mistakes)

Neff *et. al* (2007) have pointed out that most learners of English whose L1 is Spanish have difficulty in dealing with generic reference, owing to the fact that the use of zero determiner+uncountable/plural nouns is not possible in our mother tongue. The frequent mistake “the society” epitomizes this situation: this noun being uncountable in general, it takes zero determiner in English (similar only to the Spanish fixed expressions “vivir en sociedad” or “presentarse en sociedad”).

- **The use of superlatives** (“believe that best products have to do”) (1 mistake)
- **Fixed expressions** (“on one hand, certain...”, “thrust into spotlight”, “find balance”, “study at the university”, “have enormous impact”, “consumer society”, “clothes industry”) (10 mistakes)
- **The structure as a + N** (“They should value themselves as ? person”, “enjoying doing what we have as ? hobby”) (2 mistakes). This mistake could also be a result of transfer from Spanish fixed expressions and the use of the preposition “como” in similar contexts.
- **Two elements struggling for the Spec-NP position**: “The Valentine’s day”, “almost the 80% of the students” (2 mistakes). This mistake could once again be due to L1 transfer.

### d- Genitive Case:

Difficulties in relation to the genitive case have arisen due to the following causes:

- **The existence of a plural N as the head of the NP** (“wear adult’s clothes”, “their parent’s best choice”, “publisher’s reaction to Amazon”), which leads students either to omit the ‘s or to use the plural “s” as a genitive case marker. Some students assume that the extra “s” that marks case might appear to be redundant when accompanied by a plural noun, perhaps due to the interplay between these two morphemes, both of them having the same phonetic representation and morphological distribution. (17 mistakes)

- **Assignment of subjective case to the head DP position**, particularly in relation to the determiner “its” (“but it population has”, “through it pages”, “in it slogan”). (3 mistakes)
- **Assignment of genitive case to elements occupying positions other than Spec-NP/ head DP**: “have to do with famous’ consumption”, “since their became part of the project”. (2 mistakes). These mistakes seem to disguise an erroneous word category, in the first case, for example, where participants take the adjective as if it were a noun, perhaps overgeneralising the process that “the rich” and “the poor” have undergone.
- **Use of ‘s instead of the periphrastic or a compound N**: “the emotions’ place” “the city’s walls” (2 mistakes)

#### **e- Verb patterns: Passive forms and unaccusative verbs:**

As regards passive structures, mistakes due to diverse causes have been observed, the most recurrent of which has been the use of an infinitive instead of a past participle (“\*to get children involve in activities”, “\*another important thing to be mention” -5 errors). In addition, the irregular past participle forms of verbs like **wear** and **show** have been problematic (3 mistakes-“clothes which resemble the ones wore by adult people”, “the attitudes and ironies showed by the minister...”).

Problems with the roles assigned by the verbs, as in the case of the transitive verb **lay** (perhaps owing to confusion with **lie**) and with the link verb **become**, have also emerged: (“the emphasis will lay on adolescents”, “has been chosen, worn and become famous by the Duchess”- 2 mistakes). Difficulties have also been observed apparently deriving from the impossibility of accusative case-marking in passive structures (“it should be taken into account the increase in the suicide rate” 2 mistakes).

Other mistakes are due to the selection of forms other than the past participle for the passive construction: “Aspects which are taking into account...”, “Looks set to be votes” (2 errors).

In relation to unaccusative verbs, most of the mistakes are associated with assigning objects to them, which cannot be marked, as in the cases “a product which arises a problem in society”; “the problem that had been taken place in Venezuela”, and “teenagers have worsened their behaviour” (5 mistakes). The obverse of this situation, i.e the use of an accusative verb as if it were unaccusative, has also been detected in one case (“the kind of person he shows to be” 1 mistake).

### **3.1.3. Qualitative analysis of learners’ mistake frequency logs (IMFL)**

In this section we will analyse the use participants have made of the IMFLs and the attention they have allocated to their errors in these forms. This analysis, which is organised around the heading of each of the mistake types discussed above, should shed some light on the reflective processes learners may undergo when faced with teachers’ feedback and with certain mistake types they encounter in their production.

#### **3.1.3.1. Missing Subjects**

Only two students have kept a record of mistakes that belong to this category. St9 recorded an instance of missing subject in WS1 and that error was not repeated in subsequent tasks. After two previous errors (WS1 and 6), the learner made a note of a mistake in WS7 (“The case of teenagers who take lessons in keyboard ? are prone to experience”) and in WS13 a similar mistake appears recorded (“in relation to “identifying suspects or convicted criminals on line” ? can cause... ”).

These data are not conclusive as to the effects of IMFLs on missing subject mistakes. Rather, they might lend support to Ferris’ claim above about individual differences in learners’ “ability to utilize and process teacher feedback successfully (in the short or long term)” (Ferris, 2006:96 ), given that one of the students has repeated the mistake in a very similar form, while the other learner has not made this mistake anymore. What is clear and undeniable about this error type is that students in our sample have not paid much attention to it in their IMFLs, compared to other categories such as genitive case or determiner mistakes.

As regards those participants who have not kept the IMFL, there is clear evidence of repetition of mistake type and even of the same sentence containing a mistake. ST4 has repeated exactly the same erroneous sentence in two different written assignments:

WS5: “Which show us how glamorous ? is to have a car”

WS10: “Which show us how glamorous ? is to wear fashionable clothes”

It could be claimed that, in the case of ST4, the recurrence of a missing subject in similar environments might have been avoided if the first occurrence of this mistake had been recorded in the log. In fact, this case lends support to the hypothesis that lack of use of the IMFL results in a certain degree of unawareness of errors in their production, which in turn leads to the same mistake not being noticed and eventually eradicated.

### **3.1.3.2. Double subjects**

None of the students have recorded an instance of double subject in their logs; hence the difference between students with and without logs cannot be measured. For instance, St2 made two similar mistakes in WS1 and 3 (“what it is worst...”, “it is life that it is portrayed”) and three errors of this category were observed in St1’s work, two of which involve word categories (“last one drawback”, “the former it is cheap”).

In general, it could be argued that learners have not devoted much attention to mistakes related to subjects in their logs, which might have been considered by them either simple “slips of the pen” or so infrequent or irrelevant (in communicative terms) that they were not worth taking notes of. Another explanation could well be that they do not perceive them as mistakes and are not aware of how recurrent they actually were in their own production. They might also not understand where the mistake lies, and thus never consider it an error to eradicate.

### **3.1.3.3. Determiners**

In all cases, it can be said that students who have kept the log have not repeated the same mistake in exactly the same context, something that did happen in the case of St8, who did not use the IMFL and omitted the indefinite determiner “a” after “as” in expressions such as “They should value themselves as ? person” and “enjoy doing what we have as ? hobbie” (in WS1 and WS3). St4, with no log, has made 3 of these mistakes related to fixed expressions (“on other hand”, “thrust into spotlight” “best products”), which, in a sense, could be considered the easiest errors to correct, given that these structures do not involve any stylistic or pragmatic decision: determiners always follow the same pattern in those fixed expressions. However, due to lack of the log, this student has not noticed the recurrence of this type of mistake in his production and is unlikely to correct it.

As regards students who kept the log, the data show variability for this type of mistake. Two students (St2 and St9) did not repeat the same type of determiner mistake after having recorded it in the IMFL. St9 did not make any determiner error after the only recorded mistake in WS3, whereas St2 recorded one of the four errors made in this respect (“mass media” in WS 5- Lack of specification) and made another determiner mistake in WS7 due to different causes (“all the famous people” - Det + PI).

Besides, three students have repeated the same type of determiner errors, though not verbatim, after having recorded them.

- St3 made a note of two instances of Det + PI errors (“the online markets”- WS4 and “the artists’ rage or unhappiness”- WS 9). A fixed phrase mistake (“clothes industry”- WS2) was recorded and not repeated.
- St5 recorded two Det + PI mistakes (“the readers” WS9 and “the walls of the caverns” WS11). An error due to a fixed expression (“Study at the university”- WS9) was recorded and not repeated.
- St7 registered two occurrences of Det+ PI errors (“The people’s unhappiness” - WS3 and “The perfect lives”- WS8) and another error related to generic reference was observed (but not recorded) in WS9 (“the society’s situation).

From all these data, it may be inferred that perhaps it is easier for students not to repeat a recorded mistake that involves fixed expressions or adding a determiner due to lack of specification. Generic reference errors are persistent and may require more than one recording in logs to disappear, perhaps with a more conscious and explicit focus on this error type. It might even be argued that recording in itself might not result in sufficient noticing to cause error eradication. More elaboration, in the shape of practice, as suggested by Boers and Lindstromberg (2009), might be necessary for learners to a) be able to detect the mistake, b) avoid the linguistic/grammatical context in which they typically make it or c) correct it.

#### **3.1.3.4. Passives and Unaccusatives**

A remarkable phenomenon in relation to passive mistakes is that eight out of fifteen instances have been observed in the first WS in our group of students. In the rest of the written samples, mistakes were reduced even if only two students recorded instances of passive errors: St1 (“wore”-WS1 and “emphasis will lay” WS7) and St5 (“children are being imposed to wear...” WS1). Neither of these students repeated those mistakes, and results cannot be compared to those of students without a log since the latter did not make any mistake regarding the passive construction.

Concerning unaccusative verbs, none of the students made a note of these errors in their logs or repeated them. Students 1, 3 and 6 made one unaccusative mistake and did not repeat it. Students 4 and 8 (with no log) made two mistakes associated with unaccusative verbs each, though owing to different causes (St4 “had been taken place” WS6 and “have worsened their behaviour” WS8- St8 “the problem that this activity arises” WS4 and “the kind of person that he shows to be” WS9).

Therefore, it could be said that while the log proved effective for those participants who used it in connection with passive structures, its effect on unaccusative mistakes cannot be measured due to insufficient data.

### 3.1.3.5. Genitive case

As regards genitive case mistakes, Student 1 shows an important degree of evolution through her log:

MISTAKES (NOT RECORDED)	MISTAKES (RECORDED)
WS 4 “Consumer’s credit card code”	WS9 “Singer’s consciousness”
	WS12 “Students’s parents”
	WS13 “Little girls trade”

Table 4: Student 1’s genitive case errors

It can be noted that this student realizes the need for a plural, extra “s” due to her first recording in WS9, which leads her to the second mistake owing to overgeneralization of the rule (WS12). Trying to avoid this error, the learner omitted both the apostrophe and the genitive ‘s’ in the last mistake recorded.

This progression allows us to observe the process through which this participant reflects upon the genitive marker ‘s, an evolution in which the log seems to have played a key role, acting as a tool that helped foster this student’s analysis of her errors, even if, as evinced in WS13, she was not able to correct the error.

Students 3 and 7 have not repeated their genitive case mistakes after having recorded them (Student 3 recorded a mistake related to plural N+’s and Student 7 recorded an error due to lack of ‘s and another related to the use of the ‘s in lieu of the periphrastic).

Student 5 registered only 2 of her 6 mistakes in her IMFL, repeating in WS3 (“satisfy other’s needs”) a plural + ’s mistake recorded before in WS1 (“wear adult’s clothes). Sts 2, 6, 9 and 10 did not record any of these types of errors in their logs.

The analysis of these participants’ recording of the different mistake types in their logs has also thrown light on the fact that, for all the errors recorded in logs, students were able to provide correct versions or alternative ways to express the original meaning, observed in the “How to correct them” column. Although a careful study of the relation between their recording of mistakes and the correct versions they offered will not be pursued in this paper, there is evidence in the data that suggests that these learners managed to identify the problem/s and resort to reference books or to the teachers so as to rectify their mistakes.

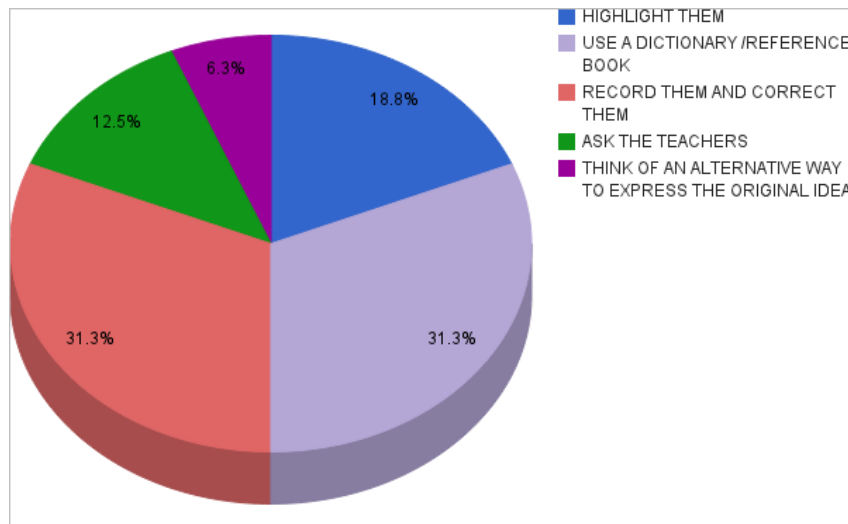
In this section we have presented the results obtained through the analysis of learners’ written assignments and of their IMFLs in terms of a number of previously selected mistake types. We will now turn to the data obtained on the usefulness of the logs through the questionnaires answered by participants.

### 3.1.4. Questionnaires

Nine students took the questionnaire, which was open not only to our original sample of participants but to all English IV students. The results have been organised around each of the questions, which will be treated separately.

#### 3.1.4.1. Question 1: *What do you do about the mistakes you have made in your Lupas / exams once these assignments have been corrected by the teachers?*

The following graph illustrates the different uses learners have given to the feedback provided by teachers to their written production.



Graph 4: Distribution of learners’ responses to Q1

It can be observed that learners' preferred strategies involve using a dictionary or grammar book and recording and correcting these errors, usually in combination with asking the teachers and highlighting the mistakes. The following are transcriptions of some answers provided for this question:

- *“Los resalto e intento corregirlos, si no sé como mejorar mi versión consulto con el diccionario o la profesora”*
- *“I usually try to find out the reason of the mistake I have made so I consult mi grammar reference book”,*
- *“Luego de recibir las correcciones, las escribo en la hoja de errores y también busco la palabra o la frase en el diccionario para ver bien el uso”*

#### **3.1.4.2. Question 2: *Do you usually keep a record of your mistakes? How? Why?***

Seven out of nine students claim to keep a record of their mistakes, of which two do so in a notebook and two resort to the log. Yet another student mentions one further strategy of recording errors: her/his mistakes are written down on a sheet of paper *“which I can see daily (...). I think that if I see it continuously, there will be a day when I will take the right version naturally”*.

Another student states that she does not write drafts and prefers to think the whole sentence before writing it. In her words, *“mis errores son de no recordar bien los patterns, o no pensar mejores formas de expresar una idea”*.

Similarly, another learner points out that her/his errors are recorded on the same assignment and are checked afterwards.

With respect to the reason why errors are recorded, students refer to the following: “Not to make them again” (4 students), “fix patterns” (2 students), “see what the most frequent mistakes are” (1 student) and “acquire patterns naturally” (1 student).

#### **3.1.4.3. Question 3: *Did you use the IMFL during 2011? Why? Why not?***

Seven students claimed that they made use of the IMFL because it was “useful”, “practical”, “organized”, and “easy to study from”. The two learners who do not keep the IMFL give different arguments against it, such as using a different recording strategy and “laziness”.

#### **3.1.4.4. Question 4: *Was the log useful for you? Why? Why not?***

All the students state that the log is useful, although one of them confesses that, in terms of his/her own experience this is not the case, *“Sí, aunque no le presté demasiada atención a causa de la manera en que registré mis errores”*. One learner used the log only once and argued that she makes mistakes with the collocations s/he already knows (*“creo que es bueno para darme cuenta que debo repasar más”*).



The features they have put forward for log usefulness are the organization it contributes to (1 student), mistake visualization (2 students), how time-saving it results in exams (1 student) and the possibility it offers of avoidance of mistake repetition (2 students).

#### 3.1.4.5. Question 5: *Was keeping a record of your mistakes practical?*

Graph 5 below summarises learners' rating of how practical it is for them to keep a record of their mistakes.

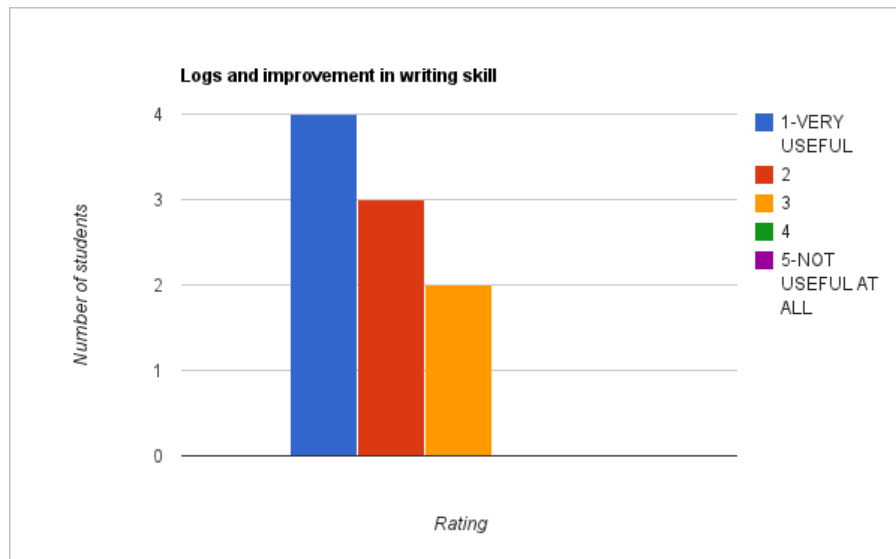


Graph 5: Learners' rating of the practicality of keeping a mistake log

As can be observed in the graph above, almost all learners rated keeping a regular record of their mistakes as very practical. Although they have not been questioned above the practicality of the logs themselves, and although it relies on learners' subjective appreciations, it also sheds some light upon the possible use they might make or might have made of the logs, even if they haven't done so so far. If participants perceive this instrument or the strategy in general as practical and useful, there is a lot of potential in its use. Further research should address this issue.

#### 3.1.4.6. Question 6: *Do you consider that keeping a record of your mistakes in your log helped you to improve your writing skill?*

This question in the questionnaire explores the potential benefits of keeping a record as affecting learners' writing skill. Participants were invited to rate how useful the logs were with respect to this macro-skill. As shown below, most respondents have graded mistake-recording on the 3-5 rates, which indicates how positive their evaluation of the instrument is making improvements in their written production.



Graph 6: Learners' rating of logs and their usefulness to improve the writing skill

#### 3.1.4.7. Question 7: *What changes would you make to the IMFL?*

Seven students mentioned that they would not introduce any change to the IMFL. One of the learners suggested that more space would be needed to add more alternative solutions to the problem (“por ejemplo, para sinónimos”) and another pointed out that an extra column would be necessary to write down the correct uses of the expression that they have used incorrectly.

On the whole, the respondents to this questionnaire have provided very positive feedback on the use and practicality of recording errors to improve their performance and, in particular, of mistake logs. Some have put forward some suggestions for the design of the IMFL and some others have presented alternative strategies that help them deal with their mistakes.

## 4. Discussion

The results from the questionnaire and from the analysis of the corpus of written assignments and of learners' IMFLs show that, in general terms, students have reflected upon their errors after they have been corrected and that they keep a record of some of their mistakes. They consider the log to be a practical and useful tool that has had or would have had a positive effect on their writing skill.

When analysing participants' recording of their mistakes, we can observe that certain errors have received more attention than others. This might show that: a) learners perceive a certain mistake type is recurrent in their production or b) that they believe that (only) this type of mistake presents them with a problem in their learning. Learners may also fail to notice the recurrence of other mistakes due to the way in which they choose to record their mistakes in their IMFLs. This, in turn, could result in the absence of certain mistakes in their logs and in learners' repetition of the same mistake across written assignment (WS).

Moreover, participants may have focused on those mistakes that they made more frequently, without having weighed the importance in communicative terms that each error has. For these students, the salience and relevance of the different mistakes might be correlated with the number of times these errors appear in their written assignments. If this is the case, IMFLs have served their purpose. Since learners were not encouraged to assess either the communicative weight of their mistakes for them to be recorded onto their IMFLs or their seriousness, participants focused merely on those errors they encountered repeated times in the feedback received.

On the other hand, differences across participants may stem from the “tremendous variability in students’ ability to benefit from grammar instruction and feedback” (Ferris, 2006). As Goldstein (2010) indicates, some language-independent factors may affect the way in which students revise and make use of teacher feedback. Some examples of these factors are:

- Students’ personality (individuality)
- Their expectations about their and the teacher’s roles
- Their beliefs about what the class demands
- Their relationship with the content of their writing in terms of knowledge (familiarity)
- external influences (time devoted to the course or to other activities).

The present study, however, has not researched these issues.

Learners’ individual way of dealing with teacher feedback may point to factors that might be responsible for the heterogeneous results obtained by participants within the experimental group (with a log) in our study.

Nevertheless, an exploration of both the quantitative and qualitative data reveals that: a) participants who have kept the log have, in general terms, reduced the number of errors in their WS (even if this reduction did not occur across all the students and error categories in the same manner); b) most of these students have not repeated the recorded errors in the same context and due to the same causes, c) none of them has repeated an error verbatim, d) learners who have not kept the log have repeated errors verbatim or in the same context; and e) answers to the questionnaire show that logs are considered to be a practical and useful tool that has had or would have had a positive effect on their writing skill. These results confirm our hypothesis as far as our sample is concerned.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored the effects that IMFLs have had on a sample of English IV students with regard to their reflection upon their own mistakes, in conjunction with learners’ opinions about logs.

Despite individual variability in log use and the differences that have been found across the diverse error types, IMFLs can be considered to have served the purpose of helping students notice and analyse most of their mistakes. In most of the error types that we have researched, the log has

been a useful tool for learners to avoid mistake recurrence, as evinced in the little repetition of mistake type after its recording, and in the fact that the opposite has taken place in those students who did not complete their logs. Moreover, participants claim to have improved in their writing in their answers to the questionnaire.

Further research would be necessary to assess the effectiveness of log use in different linguistic areas (cohesion, style) and in text types other than essays. In addition, analysis of a larger sample of learners would be essential to extend our conclusions to the whole English IV.

This study has provided us with a better insight into students' reflection upon their writing skill and into their self-awareness as to certain types of mistakes they tend to repeat, and could be considered not a final product but a point of departure for in-depth investigation in this area.

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