

Grammatical Errors in Pre-service English Teachers' Argumentative Essays and their Views Regarding Error Correction

Errores gramaticales en ensayos argumentativos de profesores de inglés en formación y sus puntos de vista sobre la corrección de errores

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RESUMEN

Este estudio busca identificar errores gramaticales en ensayos argumentativos escritos por futuros profesores/as de inglés como lengua extranjera en el quinto semestre universitario, determinar si las y los estudiantes están conscientes de sus errores y descubrir sus experiencias con la instrucción gramatical y la corrección de errores. Realizamos un Análisis de Errores, cuyos resultados se contrastaron con una prueba de juicio de gramaticalidad (GJT) para evaluar la conciencia de los y las estudiantes sobre los errores gramaticales detectados en sus ensayos. Luego, los resultados se compararon con una encuesta para descubrir los puntos de vista del estudiantado sobre el aprendizaje de gramática en inglés y la corrección de errores usando métodos mixtos de investigación. Los errores más comunes encontrados estaban en el nivel de la frase verbal, uso del sujeto, patrón de cláusula, preposiciones y patrones verbales. De estos errores, las preposiciones, patrones verbales y de cláusulas fueron los más problemáticos en el GJT. Al caracterizar los errores gramaticales y contrastarlos con sus propios juicios y opiniones, encontramos que los errores más frecuentes pueden no haber sido superados, ya que no lograron identificar y corregir los mismos tipos de

Palabras clave: Errores gramaticales, errores en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua, prueba de juicio de gramaticalidad (GJT), retroalimentación.

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errores en el GJT aplicado un año después. Los y las estudiantes son conscientes de sus propias debilidades gramaticales, ya que los contenidos considerados más difíciles de aprender coinciden con los contenidos en los que peor se desempeñan en dicha prueba. Finalmente, las y los estudiantes sugieren estrategias alternativas de retroalimentación que incluyen el monitoreo entre pares para hacer que su proceso de corrección de errores sea reflexivo.

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to identify grammatical errors in argumentative essays written by prospective teachers of English as a foreign language in the fifth semester of college, determine whether students are aware of their mistakes, and discover their experiences with grammar instruction and error correction. We conducted an Error Analysis and contrasted results with a grammaticality judgment test (GJT) to assess students' awareness of grammatical errors detected in their essays. Using mixed methods research, we compared results with a survey to discover the students' views on English grammar learning and error correction. The most common errors were verb phrases, subject usage, clause patterns, prepositions, and verb patterns. Of these errors, prepositions, verbs, and clause patterns were the most problematic in the GJT. When characterizing grammatical errors and contrasting them with their judgments and opinions, we found that students did not overcome their most frequent mistakes, as they failed to identify and correct the same types of errors in the GJT applied one year later. Students are aware of their grammatical weaknesses since the contents considered the most challenging to learn coincide with those in which they perform worst on the test. Finally, students suggest alternative feedback strategies, including peer monitoring, to make their error correction process reflective.

Keywords:
grammatical errors, second language learning errors, grammaticality judgment test (GJT), feedback.

Introduction

Grammar has been defined in many different ways. Among the most traditional definitions we have prescriptive and descriptive grammar, the former referring to a set of prescriptions about language forms and their use and the latter referring to a description of language behaviour by the users of a language. More current definitions state that grammar may also refer to a system of meaningful structures and patterns which could be compiled for instructional and assessment purposes (Larsen-Freeman, 2011, p. 518), an approach that is known as pedagogical grammar. As Larsen-Freeman points out, grammar is a system of meaningful structures and patterns that are governed by particular pragmatic constraints, dimensions that the author classifies as form, meaning and use. These useful dimensions allow instructors to explain that grammatical forms have a certain meaning attached to themselves, and that users need to know when to use these elements.

Pedagogical grammar is the definition favoured in this investigation as it is the one that allows instructors to explain grammatical content considering the dimensions of form, meaning, and use (... *that there are structures that carry certain meanings which language users put to use*). One particular problem encountered in many classrooms, as pointed out by Larsen Freeman, is that students seem to know the grammar rules explicitly, but they fail to apply these rules in real communicative instances correctly (Larsen-Freeman, 2011, p. 523). Harmer (2019) suggests that the mistakes learners make can be classified into three main categories: 1) *slips*, defined as mistakes that students can correct themselves once the mistakes have been pointed out to them; 2) *errors*, defined as mistakes that students cannot correct themselves and which need explanation; and 3) *attempts*, defined as mistakes made by learners when they try to express something but do not know how.

Another category is described as *developmental errors*, which occur as a result of learners making assumptions about how the language works. What is important to realise, the author suggests, is that we instructors tend to give feedback based on the type of mistake that we believe the students are making.

One particular source that could help instructors to see how learners are using the target language is the argumentative essays that the students write in their writing classes of their English Pedagogy programs. Writing is considered to be a difficult process even in our first language. This complication, Heydari and Bagheri suggests (2012), has led researchers to try to identify the most common grammatical errors that learners make when writing in a foreign language given that a better understanding of these errors can help teachers realise the difficulties that students face. Because of this, teachers can adapt their teaching strategies to help learners to improve their writings.

Motivated by what we believe may help our learners achieve grammatical precision, the following study seeks to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the most common errors found in argumentative essays written by EFL pre-service teachers in their fifth semester of their programs?
- 2) What grammatical errors are students aware/unaware of after completing their undergraduate studies?
- 3) What are the students' beliefs about grammar instruction/learning and error correction and their views regarding grammar instruction/learning and error correction?

Situated within the context of pre-service EFL teachers in the fifth and eighth semester of their program taking advanced writing courses, the present study falls within the category of Error Analysis in foreign/second language learning.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To categorise the types of errors found in argumentative essays written by EFL pre-service teachers in the fifth semester of their programmes, considering the error analysis seen in the literature.
2. To examine the students' awareness of their most common grammatical errors in the eighth semester of their teaching programme by applying a grammaticality judgement test.
3. To uncover the students' experiences regarding grammar instruction/learning and error correction.

Theoretical Framework

The study of grammar by non-native speakers is of paramount importance if an EFL learner is to achieve accuracy, which has been traditionally defined as the ability to speak or write in a foreign language without making mistakes or, as suggested by Housen, Kuiken, and Vedder (2012), as the extent to which an L2 learners' performance deviates from the norm, with these deviations being labelled as errors. According to Thornbury (2017), however, accuracy should be judged or defined in terms of appropriacy in context. In this respect, a revision of the concept has led the author to suggest that "accuracy is the extent to which a speaker/writer's lexical and grammatical choices are unremarkable according to the norms of the (immediate) discourse community" (p. 2). We believe this definition takes into consideration the proposals of descriptive grammarians as language is analysed in the context in which it occurs.

Inaccuracy, on the other hand, would then lead to errors that would cause failure in achieving linguistic objectives as defined in a language syllabus. However, we need to remember that language errors, according to Salille-Troike (in Al-Sobhi, 2019) also serve as windows to indirectly observe the different stages of proficiency in the learner language, which in this case, must be seen as something to explore in order to improve such learner language rather than something to be avoided (James, 2013).

The importance of accuracy for language learners can be seen in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* as it is part of the description of proficient users at level C2, where learners are expected to "convey finer shades of meaning precisely by using, with reasonable accuracy, a wide range of qualifying devices (e.g., adverbs expressing degree, clauses expressing limitations)" (2018, p. 143). One key word here is the term *precisely* which makes direct reference to accuracy. As students struggle towards using the L2 precisely or towards accuracy, the area of error analysis may prove beneficial to both teachers and learners. When this area was developing in 1967 with Corder's paper *The Significance of Learners' Errors*, the author suggested that the study of errors was significant for teachers, researchers, and students in three ways: 1) they tell the teacher what needs to be taught; 2) they tell the researcher how learning is proceeding; and 3) they are a means

whereby learners can test their hypotheses about the L2 (in James, 2013, p. 12). It is important to remember that when Error Analysis (EA) was developing, the focus was on finding the source of the grammar errors encountered. Sadighi and Heydari (2012) also suggest that in recent years there has been a growing number of studies in the field of EA and that the studies reviewed attempted to identify and classify errors and thus help teachers to be aware of the problematic areas with which the learners were struggling so as to help them become accurate users of English grammar. These useful reviews allow us to see that the interest of applied linguists lies in finding the source of the errors, even to this day (Neupane, 2023), and in that endeavour some authors have suggested that the sources of these errors may seem to be in the students' L1.

The contribution of the analysis of errors, though, in contrast with contrastive analysis, lies in the fact that these errors could now be defined in terms of the target language that the students are learning.

In EA, errors are defined by James (2013, p. 1) as “the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes, and consequences of unsuccessful language”. Other authors in the same area have suggested that errors can be understood as “a reliable and accurate source of information about the development of language learning” (Díaz, Fuentealba, Maureira, & Pedreros, 2020). In a meta-analysis of EA studies conducted by Wood (2017), the author discovered that the grammatical errors made by learners with different L1s (Arabic, Chinese, English, Spanish, etc.) learning different L2s (English, German, Swedish, etc.) converge in their results suggesting a substantial influence of the L1 on the L2. However, the evidence does not seem to converge when we talk about ESL/EFL learners, and this transfer phenomenon between the L1 and the L2 has created two distinct interpretations, with those who consider the influence of the L1 to be very important even at higher levels of competence on the one hand, and those who minimise the influence exerted by the L1 on the other. Yang is one of the authors who suggests that learners' errors in L2 are not caused by the influence of their L1 (2010). In this respect, Yang proposes that teachers should always pay attention to the students' learning strategies, trying to be sensitive to their learners' errors and identify the kinds of errors students make so that the teaching materials used could be adapted or modified accordingly.

Even though there are a number of studies that attempted to include different methods to learn what the most common errors are and why students make them (Díaz et al., 2020; McDowell, 2019; Wood, 2017; Donoso & Gómez, 2018; Pardo, 2021) what we miss in the data collection of many Error Analysis studies is the students' experiences in dealing with errors, which in our view can offer valuable information to understand not the source of these errors but rather the students' awareness of the most common errors they once made and, most importantly, to shed light on how learning develops not from the point of view of a researcher but from that of the learners themselves. In this way, we incorporated a qualitative aspect in this research which deals with the students' perceptions and opinions regarding their grammar errors, as well as their reflections on the major areas that our feedback needs to focus on, following the work by Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020).

Research Design

The methodology used to collect data in this study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature, as our study not only focuses on describing the amount and type of errors pre-service teachers make and the extent to which they realise the presence of non-standard language forms, but also on characterising the students' thoughts and opinions about the difficulties they experienced in learning and using the L2 grammar. That is why, in order to successfully address our research objectives, it was necessary that we used a different array of methods that could, as Tashakkori and Teddlie point out, "reveal a fuller picture of a problem in practice" (in Ivankova & Wingo, 2018, p. 980), which in this case, seeks to determine how well-consolidated the grammatical knowledge of pre-service teachers gets as they finish their education, and see if their opinions about the difficulties they encounter align with the actual errors committed. Therefore, on the one hand, this study gathers numerical data about the Error Analysis conducted, which led us to determine the number and frequency of errors made in the sampled argumentative essays, which are later analysed using descriptive statistics. Additionally, this study gathers data from a Grammaticality Judgement Test (GJT) which was applied to the same students who wrote the aforementioned essays, a year after writing them, to observe the degree to which they could detect and explain the type of errors

they had made before. On the other hand, this study is also descriptive since we conducted a content analysis of the students' opinions about the most challenging grammatical contents in their learning process, by means of a semi-opened online questionnaire that gathered their written responses.

Participants and Essay Corpus

To conduct our error analysis, 48 argumentative essays were considered as our corpus. These texts were written by third-year students at an English pedagogy programme. These texts were written in their academic writing course, and were required by the teachers as part of their formative and summative assessment.

Finally, to conduct the semi-opened questionnaire and to apply the GJT, we asked the same students who had written the essays to answer it. The students asked to do the test a year after they had written their essays to see if the grammatical content exposed by their previous errors had been consolidated and overcome at this point in their formative process. It is also relevant to point out that only a third of the students who participated in the essay writing completed the questionnaire and the GJT.

Instruments for Data Gathering and Procedure

Instrument 1: Error analysis of argumentative essays

Firstly, to find and categorise the grammatical errors encountered in the essays, the process to follow has to consider the following:

We put together a suitable taxonomy that would account for all the grammatical errors found in the students' written texts, since previous taxonomies did not seem to satisfy the error identification found in our data.

The different categories that we considered accounted for all of the grammatical errors found, which are related to the use of the following grammatical aspects at the clause, phrase, and word levels. The elements included in our grammatical errors' taxonomy can be seen in the table with their corresponding description below:

Table 1.

Grammatical categories used to detect the errors in the sampled essays

Nouns	9. Adjectives
Subject	10. Pronouns
Subject-verb agreement	11. Genitive phrase
Verb phrase	12. Verb patterns
Determiners	13. Clause pattern
Conjunctions	14. Parallel structure
Prepositions	15. Fixed phrases
Adverbs	

Nouns

Nouns refer to persons, things, substances, places and abstractions of various kinds (Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad, 2022). A noun can be the head of a noun phrase, and within the clause they function as subjects, objects, or complements.

Subject

English is known as a subject dominant language (Berk, 1999). Regarding its structure, a subject can be a noun phrase or a noun clause. In terms of discourse, subjects define what the discourse is about.

Subject-verb agreement

This category is also known as concord. The most important type of agreement is number agreement between the subject and finite verb.

Verb Phrase

The verb phrase is the pivotal element of the clause (Leech et al., 2022). Comprising main verbs and auxiliaries, verbs describe actions, events, and states, placing these phenomena in a time frame (Berk, 1999), and can tell us whether actions or events are completed or still taking place, or even whether states are current or resultative.

Determiners

Determiners occupy the same position within the noun phrase, i.e., they precede the nouns and adjectives (Berk, 1999). Even though *the* and *a/an* are the most common determiners, this category also includes demonstrative, possessive, indefinite, and *wh*-word determiners.

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are introductory linking words which introduce clauses rather than phrases (Leech et al., 2022) and are subdivided into two main groups, namely subordinating conjunctions (*because, although, and after*) and coordinating conjunctions (*and, or, and but*).

Prepositions

Prepositions introduce prepositional phrases, and express relations of possession, place, time, etc. (Leech et al., 2022).

Adverbs

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives and other adverbs (Leech et al., 2022) and can be subdivided into three categories: 1) circumstance adverbs; 2) degree adverbs; and 3) sentence adverbs.

Adjectives

Adjectives describe qualities or properties attributed to nouns (Leech et al., 2022) and are found before nouns or after verb *be*, in which case the adjective functions as complement.

Pronouns

Pronouns refer to items that have already been introduced into the discourse (Berk, 1999) and can be classified into personal, reflexive, interrogative, relative, demonstrative and indefinite pronouns (Leech et al., 2022).

Genitive phrase

Genitive phrases refer to that category of nouns or noun phrases ending in 's, and are used to indicate possession.

Verb pattern

Verb patterns refer to the verb and the elements that follow (Carter, McCarthy, Mark & O'Keeffe, 2016). This category needs to be distinguished from clause patterns because clause patterns refer to how the phrases are used within sentences, while verb patterns refer to predicates.

Clause pattern

Clause patterns tend to be illustrated considering main clauses in declarative form, active voice and unmarked (neutral) word order. Leech

et al. (2022) recognize eight major clause patterns in English, namely SP, SPOd, SPOi, SPOiOd, SPCs, SPOdCo, SPA, and SPOdA.

Parallel structure

Parallel structure refers to elements that are connected at word, phrase or clause level in such a way that the same pattern of words is used to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance (Leech et al., 2022). Typical elements used are the correlative conjunctions *and, or, but*. This category includes the use of more complex elements which may require coordinating clauses with subordinating correlative conjunctions (*if...then; although...yet*) or coordinating correlative conjunctions (*both...and; not only...but also*).

Fixed phrases

This category includes constructions that cannot be looked at in isolation but rather as a group, as in *by the way, on your own*, etc, which together may act as a new semantic unit. Dictionaries classify these elements as idioms and phrases.

Once the errors have been categorised according to the taxonomy presented above using the criteria described to identify them, we obtained an overview of the number and frequency of each type of error to determine the overall performance of the course. In this way, the grammatical dimension of the essays was explored in more detail and we could learn the most common types of grammatical errors committed. To conclude the written texts' analysis, the data was processed and frequency of occurrence of each type of error was determined by applying descriptive statistics analysis.

Instrument 2: Grammaticality Judgement Test

The next step was to design a grammaticality judgement test (GJT) to see whether the students were aware of their grammatical errors and how they would correct them one year after having written their argumentative essays (see appendix A). Although the reliability of GJT as a method to determine the subjects' implicit and explicit grammatical knowledge has been questioned (Tabatabaei & Dehghani, 2012; Renou, 2000), especially when time is a constraint, we believe this test, if used with caution, can still be used as a tool that sheds light on the

students' ability to recognise the errors they had previously made. We were only interested in their ability to correct grammatically incorrect sentences in English and have them explicitly state what the error was, in an attempt to elicit the participants' explicit knowledge of their L2 grammar using a suitable metalanguage, as other studies have successfully done (Aydin, 2018; Gutiérrez, 2013). This test had a sample of 31 sentences which were tailor-made in order to showcase 7 of the most common types of grammatical errors found in our students' essays. The 7 categories with the most amount of errors found in total were errors related to: 1) verb phrases; 2) subject; 3) clause patterns; 4) prepositions; 5) verb patterns; 6) determiners; and 7) nouns, so we added statements with errors in these particular areas. Additionally, we added sentences with low frequency errors in order to check if the lack of evidence of use of some type of structures is because they do not dare to use them or because they have not mastered its use. That is why we also included 3 errors of the parallel structure type. Besides, the test contained 6 distractor sentences, which were grammatically correct and were also tailor-made to display the grammatical contents seen in the errors found. Thus, the students had to deal with a total number of 42 statements, including distractors and two statements that were used as a model for the answers. The participants did not have a set time to deal with the GJT, so it was untimed. The task presented followed the steps suggested by Ellis 2004, "which discussed three principal processing operations in which learners may engage when carrying out a GJT: (a) semantic processing (i.e., "understanding the meaning of a sentence" [p. 256]); (b) noticing (i.e., deciding whether or not there is something ungrammatical in a sentence); and (c) reflecting (i.e., identifying what is incorrect and possibly determining why it is incorrect)" (in Gutiérrez, 2013, p. 426).

The ultimate goal of this exercise was two-folded: on the one hand, we wanted to elicit students' explicit grammatical knowledge by asking them to correct the errors presented to them and explain the correction rule, and on the other hand, we wanted to see if, once they have finished their formal instruction at university the type of errors they had showcased a year before in their argumentative essays have been overcome. In sum, the students' accuracy of judgement was evaluated.

Instrument 3: Online questionnaire

After being presented with the grammaticality judgement test, students answered an online survey which aimed to uncover their beliefs and opinions regarding grammar instruction/learning and error correction (see appendix B). The present study's survey design takes after Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020) interview, regarding the style of questions asked. The questionnaire contained the following questions, which were semi-open ended and open-ended.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

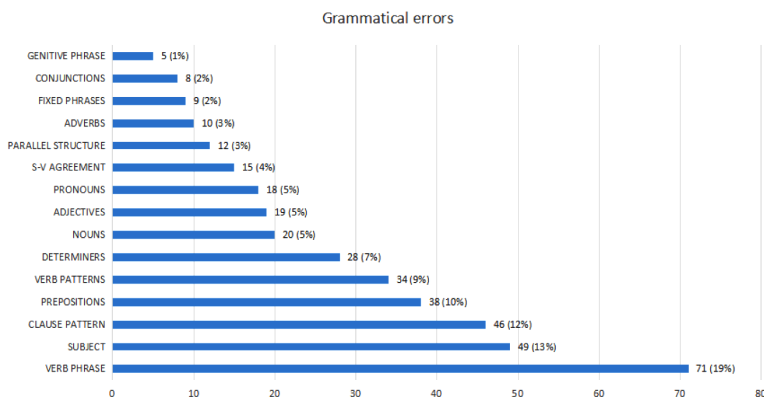
Error analysis results

Results regarding the number and types of errors found in the 48 argumentative essays analysed is discussed below:

Each essay was analysed separately, and the grammatical errors found were gathered and compared with other taxonomies in the literature offered by Díaz et al. (2020), Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020), and Wood (2017). In our opinion, the taxonomies offered seem to be context-dependent as some grammatical errors were not found in our essays. Making mistakes is a natural part of the process of learning (Harmer, 2019). In this respect, there are two ways to look at the acquisition of grammatical accuracy. Authors such as Lahuerta (2017, in Díaz et al., 2020) state that while grammatical complexity is acquired, the basic structures of the target language remain, but other authors such as Kumaradavidelu (2008) who, citing Widowson, suggests that the acquisition of competence is not an additive enterprise where learners add new knowledge or abilities but “a process of recurrent unlearning and relearning” of items, so that items used are “modified, extended, realigned, or abandoned altogether to accommodate new language data”. This idea might explain why some basic errors seem to be so persistent in students' writings even though those contents may have been covered extensively in their educational process.

The graph below shows the total number of errors per category:

Table 2.
Frequency of grammatical errors in argumentative essays



As seen in table 2, a total frequency of 376 grammatical errors was identified and categorised under 15 categories. The frequency shows that the most frequent grammatical errors committed by fifth semester pre-service teachers writing argumentative essays are related to the incorrect use of: 1) verb phrases; 2) subject; 3) clause patterns; 4) prepositions; 5) verb patterns; and 6) determiners.

What follows is an analysis of the 376 errors found in the essays, including the number of errors and a brief description of the most salient ones by category. They will be presented in the order of most frequent to least frequent.

Verb phrase

This category appeared in first position with 71 errors in total. In our analysis, we discovered problems with verb tenses, incorrect verbs used, and auxiliaries. Examples of errors are **it's only a matter of see its rating*, where the rule preposition plus -ing verb form is not used. Other examples dealt with using incorrect forms, as in the sentences **very little is talk about it*, where passive voice is omitted and in **They are together from 2013* where a different verb tense should have been used.

Subject

Typical problems deal with using double subject, subject omission, and with ing-noun clauses in subject position, as in *Seeing a ghost in*

your bedroom is a serious matter, where learners tended to use the form *see* instead of *seeing*. In our analysis, this category was the second with the most errors, with a total of 49. Examples related to -ing noun clauses as subjects are **Recycle raw material products reduce the pressure over natural resource exploitation*. Another case as related to the omission of subject in **Also, is important to add that these classes will not be the same*. An example of double subject is seen in **This addiction to videogames it is called gaming disorder*.

Clause pattern

This category ranked third with 40 errors related to the organisation of phrases within the clause. An example of this can be seen with the verb *make* in the sentence **brain capacities which make easier reading comprehension and speech process*. The incorrect positions of the elements *always* and *a lot* in the sentences **music has been always associated with daily life* and **it could help a lot the user to make friends* are examples in this category. Another case is related to the misplacement of objects in the sentence **we have to take in consideration all the previously mentioned consequences of playing computer game*.

Prepositions

Prepositions appear in fourth position with 38 errors. The preposition *due to* and *despite* are particularly problematic. Examples of this category are seen in **Despite many people think that children are ready to use technology* and **it is not incorrect due to every relationship must be based in respect*. Other cases include examples such as **Among the years we have seen how music programs have been underestimated* and **so children since a very young age start seeing and perceiving art as a secondary subject*, where spatial and temporal relations are not well established.

Verb pattern

This category ranked fifth with 34 errors. Verb pattern errors range from using a preposition instead of another, omitting the preposition needed by the verb, or adding a preposition when it is not needed at all. The following example shows the latter case, with the addition of the preposition to the verb *join*. *There is a lot of people joining to these type of gaming*. Other verb pattern problems include the omission of other

elements needed by the verb, such as other verbs or objects, such as **prevent children from adult content* where a verb is missing to complete the idea. Another case was seen in **deciding buy a game for a kid is not a big deal*, where the bare infinitive was used instead of the to-infinitive.

Determiners

This category was the last one that presented more than 5 % of errors among the students' essays, ranking sixth with 28 instances. Examples of this category can be seen in the sentences **the answer will be provided by an specialist* and **most of women demand legal and professional abortion*.

Other categories representing 5 % of errors or less include Nouns, with mistakes using incorrect words such as *scientific*, *problematic* and *prejudices* as nouns. Adjectives appear with 5 % with elements in plural form (e.g., **multiples times*) or with nouns as adjectives (e.g., **one of the biggest responsible for the contamination*). Pronouns also appear with 5% in cases as **preventing a worse panorama with them who need special attention* or **civilizations whom has its proper languages*. Subject-Verb Agreement represents 4 % of errors, with cases as **there are people who plays games*. Parallel Structure appears with 3 %, with cases as **not only for develop tolerance, but also because there will be students in the classroom whose sexuality will be different*. Adverbs also appear with 3 % with samples as **Even there is a television program called Catfish*. Fixed Phrases appear with 2 %, with samples as **a result* or **by your own* instead of *as a result* or *on your own*. Conjunction appears with 2 % of errors in cases where no conjunction was used or where the elements were coordinated incorrectly. Finally, Genitive Phrase represents 1 % of the errors encountered, with errors as **people limits* or **others bodies*.

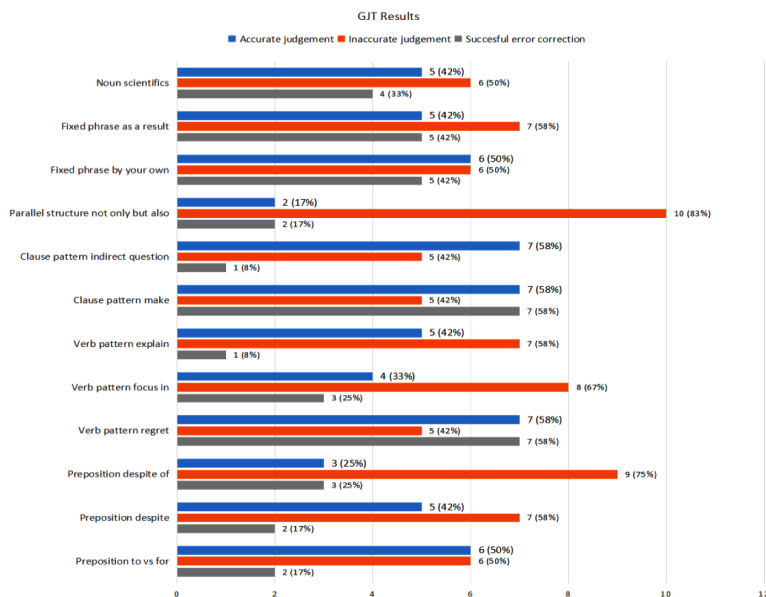
Grammaticality Judgement Test Results

This section presents the results obtained in the Grammaticality Judgement Test designed to test students' awareness of the grammatical errors they made in their argumentative essays. We considered that students were successful in this instrument if their results were 67 % or higher. Of the grammatical errors in our taxonomy, only conjunctions,

pronouns and adverbs contained 67 % accurate judgements and successful error corrections. The sentences in the conjunctions category contained errors with the words *if* in the sentence **She cannot decide if to marry him or not, unless* in **I can't help you unless you don't tell me what is wrong*, and *because of* in **We went by bus because of it was cheaper*. Pronouns appear with *who* in the sentence **He didn't tell me who's names were on the list* and *that* in **I never understood that she meant by that*. Adverbs appeared with *even* in the sentence **He's determined to prove his innocence, even he has to go to the highest court* and *suspiciously* in **The man was seen acting suspiciously*.

The next categories, namely subjects, verb phrases, prepositions, verb patterns, clause patterns, conjunctions, parallel structure, determiners, fixed phrases, and nouns will be presented with two different graphs as their results differ regarding the students' judgements in the instrument. The graph below presents results in which accurate judgements and successful error corrections were below 67 %:

Table 3.
GJT results which show below a 67 % of accuracy in judgements

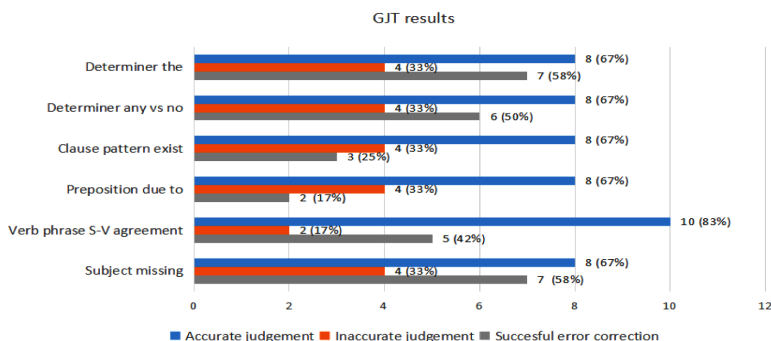


From the data gathered above, we can observe that some grammatical errors seem to be more prevalent than others. In the category parallel structure, which was studied with the sentence **She wrote not only the text but also selected the illustrations*, only 17 % of respondents identified that sentence as erroneous. Prepositions, with the sentence **Recycling is a good way to manage waste despite of its cost*, had only 25 % accurate judgements and successful error correction. The verb pattern *focus on something* in sentence **Schools shouldn't focus exclusively in exam results* had 67 % inaccurate judgements. The accurate judgements (33 %) in that category do not match the successful error correction (25 %) because one respondent suggested the mistake was the position of adverb *exclusively*. In the same category of verb patterns, the verb *explain* in **The doctors explained me the risks before the operation* had more inaccurate (58 %) than accurate judgements (42 %). The successful error corrections in verb *explain* were only 8 %, with answers suggesting errors with word *operation* or preposition *to*. The category clause pattern appears with verb *make* and one indirect question. In the former, the sentence **Technology promises to make easier our lives* was identified with 58 % accurate judgements and successful error correction and 42 % inaccurate judgements. The sentence **Can you tell me what the best way to go to the post office is?* has the same percentage of accurate and inaccurate responses, but the successful error corrections went down to 33 % as suggestions were to move verb *is* (**Can you tell me what is the best way to go to the post office?*) and 17 % suggesting incorrect modifications. Fixed phrases appear with erroneous sentences using *by your own* and *as result*, with just 42 % successful error corrections. The noun *scientific*s had 50 % inaccurate judgements, with the successful error correction going down to 33 % because one respondent did not offer any explanation and another suggested **scients* as the correct noun, so we cannot decide whether this word was an error or a typographical mistake.

The following graph presents results. In each there is a mismatch between accurate judgements with 67 % and successful error corrections below 67 %. In these cases, the mismatch happened due to responses with inaccurate or non-existent corrections offered.

Table 4.

GJT results with mismatches between accurate judgements and unsuccessful corrections



The data above shows that the sentence with subject missing **Many people quit school because they think is a waste* contain 58 % successful error corrections, with one respondent suggesting the problem was with verb *quit* instead of the subject. A similar percentage of successful error correction was observed with determiner *the* in sentence **The paper recycling is beneficial to avoid deforestation*. In the case of *any* in **This issue has almost any importance to people in rural areas*, unsuccessful error corrections were 50 %, with a respondent suggesting the sentence may be wrong but not offering a reason for the error, and another respondent suggesting *any* should be followed by preposition *of*.

Questionnaire Results

The data gathered from the questionnaire that was sent together with the GJT can be subdivided into three thematic categories according to the content analysis conducted. That is to say, there were two questions related to grammatical content, one question related to the learners’ strategies to prevent the occurrence of errors, and finally two questions related to teachers’ strategies to correct errors.

On the most frequent types of grammatical errors

The first question asked the students about the most difficult grammatical content studied at university. The data obtained indicates that the students believe the most difficult contents were: 1) prepositions; 2) organising parts of the sentence; 3) verb tenses; and 4) reported

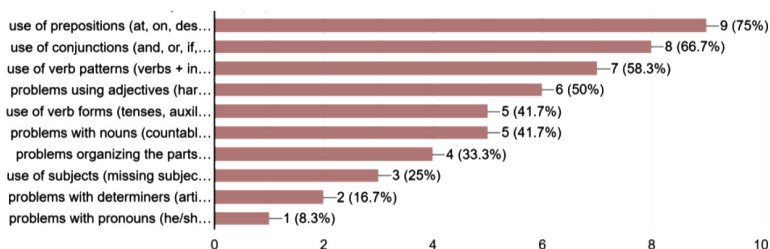
speech. Prepositions were mentioned by 33 % of the students, while the organisation of parts of a sentence was mentioned by 25 %. Verb tenses were another category that appeared represented with 25 % of responses, while reported speech was mentioned by 17 % of the students.

This question also asked the learners to explain why the contents mentioned were perceived as difficult to learn. Of the comments observed, one learner did not mention a specific content but suggested that he/she had trouble “remembering the names of the rules” even though he/she was able to “understand them, differentiate them”, in which the learner suggests that his/her explicit knowledge may not be enough to solve grammatical problems since understanding grammatical rules and applying them in real time communication are two different skills to master. Other comments that called our attention made reference to English Grammar and the Spanish language. In this respect, one learner suggested having problems with reported speech and passive voice because those elements are not frequently used in our first language. Another learner suggested that his/her problems with the organisation of elements within the phrase or clause was due to his/her tendency to follow the Spanish constituency principles. A different learner also mentioned that subjects and prepositions were hard to master because he/she writes in the same way that he/she speaks and that some recurrent errors made as a young learner are hard to change. Reported speech is also mentioned due to the verb changes to be made. Language transfer, then, transcends a variety of elements in the learner's L2 grammar, and it seems to be a big inconvenience to overcome errors even at later stages in the learners' language learning process.

The second question asked respondents to choose, among 10 categories, the five most difficult grammatical contents. As seen below, the five categories chosen by the respondents were: 1) prepositions; 2) conjunctions; 3) verb patterns, 4) adjectives; and 5) verb forms and nouns. If compared with the previous question, we observed that prepositions and verbs appear in top position again.

Table 5.

Grammatical contents which are most difficult to learn, according to the participants



On how to avoid the occurrence of errors

The third question, *What strategies did you use to prevent the occurrence of grammatical errors while writing academic texts in English?*, attempted to find out what strategies the students are using to prevent the occurrence of grammatical errors. The most common answers refer to double-checking or proofreading (33 %), independent reading paying attention to new language (33 %), using monolingual dictionaries (17 %); working with classmates or teachers to solve questions (17 %), reading and paying attention to sentences in context (33 %), practising and learning from errors (17 %), and using a browser extension called Grammarly to check grammar errors (17 %). Options mentioned only once include thinking in English what sounds better (8 %), visiting web pages to clarify questions (8 %).

On correction and feedback of grammatical errors

The fourth question asked whether the learners prefer teachers giving them the correct answer or only a clue as a way to correct errors.

Of the respondents, 50 % of respondents agreed with the notion that teachers giving correct answers was the best alternative and the other 50 % preferred teachers giving clues was the best option.

The fifth question asked students to suggest what strategies EFL teachers could use to give feedback and correct students' grammatical errors when writing essays at university. Among the answers obtained, some students suggested that feedback should be direct and clear, with examples on how to improve errors. On the same line, another student suggested that feedback should clearly indicate what the

incorrect forms are so students can focus on them. Other strategies to use were related to class work. In this respect, a couple of students suggested looking at examples in context and exchanging essays so the analysis of the texts can be carried out in groups, while others seem to prefer individual feedback with concrete corrections. Others suggest that face-to-face feedback can be better, while others suggested succinctly peer correction as a strategy to use. Some other strategies were related to assignments given by teachers, which involves teachers assigning individual activities for the students to complete on their own. These activities could be exercises or material that the students would consult on their own such as web pages with exercises, banks of words or phrases to use in essays, activities to practise paraphrasing ideas, or class-by-class writing so as to clarify doubts. One learner suggested using monolingual dictionaries as real sources because not all teachers teach how to use them, and another mentioned that teachers should avoid using simple sentences so they can learn from the very beginning how to use them effectively.

Teaching a foreign language entails the responsibility of connecting with and getting to know the obstacles the students might encounter while learning EFL. Error identification is crucial since it has pedagogical implications for teachers, as they determine the content to be taught; they show the different stages of second language acquisition, and they can help learners test their hypothesis about their L2' learning journey. As Yang points out: "teachers should be sensitive to their students' errors and summarise what kind of errors students are most likely to make at a certain period, and then adapt their teaching materials in order to adapt to the students' needs" (2010, p. 268). This is the reason why we wanted to know students' most common errors in their third year of undergraduate studies and see if they were able to notice them once during their fourth year of studies. In relation to the error analysis done, we identified that the categories with the most frequency of errors shown in our error analysis were verb phrases, subject use, clause patterns, and prepositions.

Thus, getting students to discuss the challenges that come with ESL/EFL writing and discuss strategies that can help them understand the aspects of English grammar they still don't manage can enrich the teaching-learning process for both teachers and students, since hav-

ing open discussions about the errors expected at certain levels of linguistic proficiency and detailed feedback using enough metalanguage comprehensible to students creates the awareness we need during the writing process in order to progressively minimise their occurrence.

If we compare the results of the essays' top errors found in the Error Analysis to the accuracy of judgements of the GJT, we can observe that some of the categories with most errors coincide with the inaccurate judgements of correctness. For example, the categories with the most errors were problems related to the verb phrase, verb patterns, and subject use. Likewise, the GJT's least successfully spotted errors had to do with the use of prepositions, the use of verb patterns, the use of clause patterns, and prepositions.

To this we can add that the categories that the students deemed as most difficult to learn during their teacher training programme also align with the findings observed in the Error Analysis and the GJT. Students were able to acknowledge that the use of verbs within the verb phrase, verb patterns, and the use of prepositions were ranked among the top 5 most difficult contents to master, besides conjunctions, and adjectives. Accordingly, within the top 5 categories that stood out as problematic in our Error Analysis we can also find verb forms, verb patterns and prepositions.

Even though lexical errors were not included in this investigation because the word *scientific* was one of the few errors encountered in our students' argumentative essays, the fact that 50 % of the responses did not judge that error accurately may deserve an explanation that the objectives of this research cannot satisfy. In this respect, we believe that new research is needed so as to tackle the lexical errors category in more detail in future endeavours to understand how vocabulary acquisition unfolds and develops.

The categories that were mentioned as difficult to learn included adjectives and conjunctions, but they did not prove to be problematic in comparison to the other three from the Error Analysis and the GJT data.

Lexical errors were not common in our students' essays. We believe the reason for this may lie in the fact that the teaching process of writing argumentative essays focuses on the students' writing process at the text, clause and phrase level, with an emphasis on coherence and

cohesion of ideas and structures rather than on the students' lexical choices. It must also be considered that the students' essays were written in the context of a pandemic, which means that the students were given plenty of time and autonomy to work on their pre- and while-writing processes, which may have given students room to search for the most appropriate vocabulary to use in their final drafts of their writings. This is also the reason why this investigation only focuses on the grammatical dimension of the language used instead of focusing on lexical errors, since there were so few to begin with.

Discussion

Following Yang's suggestions (2010), this study also attempted to pay attention to the participants' opinions about the strategies that the learners consider having been helpful in their learning process, to see how teachers could adapt our instruction and to help the students to overcome their linguistic problems considering the errors as evidence of the stage at which the students are at a given point in their acquisition journey.

Since academic writing is one of the skills that all pre-service teachers need to master to different degrees in their English learning process, knowing the learners' writing difficulties and their opinions about the areas they encounter most difficult to overcome might prove valuable for educators who are willing to accompany and support their students through suitable lesson plans, instruction, and feedback. In this light, the evidence gathered in our questionnaire indicates that there is an array of strategies that instructors could promote to improve the students' grammatical competence, starting with opening up instances for reflective practices that make give room to the students to talk about the metalanguage to refer to the structures that they had to deal with in their writing processes. The strategies suggested by the students may be grouped into strategies to work inside the classroom and strategies to work independently. Among these, the learners suggest group work and peer correction as effective strategies to apply more systematically during the courses. The most common answers refer to double-checking or proofreading (33 %), reading paying attention to new language (33 %), using monolingual dictionaries and a Google extension called *Grammarly* (17 %); working with classmates or teachers to solve

doubts (17 %), and practising and learning from errors (17 %). It is also interesting to point out that the students' opinions about whether the teacher should feed the students the correct answers were divided: exactly half of the students surveyed believed it would be a good idea not to be fed the correct answer but rather to focus on the error type and what to do to fix it. Regardless of the methods used to point out the deviant forms students make in their learning process, what seems clear is that these students value group work as a way to practise and learn from the errors they or others are making. Collaborative work, then, as a way of getting involved in the while-writing process of their peers is a strategy we strongly recommend to systematically implement in the different courses that require written text production, in order to make students aware that their own texts are a valuable tool, a language window, and a piece of evidence of the language learning journey they are taking together.

In relation to the GJT results, the category related to successful explanation and corrections may also reveal the way our students may offer feedback if they had to do so, since some students chose to immediately correct the errors spotted while others preferred to go around the error and focus on the structures used and the ones that should have been used. In this respect, the data obtained from the GJT shows that elements such as verb patterns, clause patterns, prepositions, and the coordination of parallel structure elements are problematic to our students.

Although the relationship between explicit knowledge and second language (L2) proficiency is still unclear (Gutiérrez, 2016), we believe that a pre-service English teacher is a special kind of L2 learner, in that, they are expected to show a high level of L2 proficiency, but also to actively refer to and explain the general rules, structures, and principles of the language acquired in their profession. In this light, English teachers or pre-service teachers need to master the metalanguage involved in EFL to explain the language and the type of errors their students could eventually make. Therefore, failure to do so may also contribute not only to the fossilisation of some of the errors they fail to detect in their own use of the language but also in the quality of feedback they themselves will be required to provide to their future students once they start their English teaching careers.

It is granted that grammatical instruction alone will not automatically lead to students mastering the grammatical rules of the target language they are learning, as suggested by Romagnoli (2015). This is especially relevant for our study and the students who took part in our study, since the participants themselves admitted in their surveys to not being able to solve some of the grammatical problems faced in the GJT or in their writings, even if they knew the grammatical rules they needed to use. Besides, the error analysis evidenced that there were some ungrammatical forms that persisted within the whole group.

Another factor that we need to consider when discussing the errors found and the apparent plateau reached by this group regarding progress in the use of the L2 grammar has to do with the type of learning environment that took place during the pandemic years, which may have contributed to the appearance of passive learners and passive learning styles among the students. Within this context of emergency remote learning that the students who participated in this study were subjected to, the strategies of peer reviewing, and collaborative learning were not easy to apply. Additionally, the amount of input in the target language, which was already limited to begin with these particular students before the pandemic, got increasingly poorer since they were forced to isolate themselves at home, preventing them from participating in communicative instances where the target language was spoken or heard outside of the video conferences held by the teachers. At least, in face-to-face learning environments, students were able to interact with other classmates, teachers, and assistants, but at home, they did not have this opportunity. The interaction needed to succeed learning an L2 at a high proficiency level may have been interrupted due to the circumstances mentioned above, which seems to be in line with the students' suggestions that effective feedback sessions should have been done collaboratively and in a face-to-face environment, where discussions about errors can be more productive and based on the opinions of peers and instructors.

Conclusions

In an attempt to unveil the different aspects that contribute to the development of EFL pre-service teachers' level of written proficiency, the present study aimed to account for the different grammatical errors

that they had committed in argumentative essays, as well as to observe the improvement of their linguistic ability at a later stage in their education. In order to achieve this goal, the following objectives were established: to categorise the types of errors found in argumentative essays written by EFL pre-service teachers in the fifth semester of their programmes; to examine the students' awareness of their most common grammatical errors in the eighth semester of their teaching programme; and to uncover the students' experiences regarding grammar learning and error correction.

In this quest, we followed a three-step methodological procedure, which was mixed in nature, and consisted in using Error Analysis to analyse the grammatical errors observed in the argumentative essays of pre-service teachers. More specifically, this first part of the study focused on the identification, correction and description of such errors committed at year 3 of the students' English teaching programme. Then, we conducted a GJT, with the purpose of Lastly, we applied a survey to gather the students' opinions about the difficulties an L2 learner faces when learning the L2 grammar and the most effective feedback strategies they believe they could have used for improving their overall performance.

The findings suggest that the grammatical errors in the essays with the highest frequencies were errors related to the construction of the verb phrase, consisting in deviant forms of non-finite verb forms, the passive voice, or reported speech. Secondly, the second most frequent errors were related to subject construction, especially in those cases where the subject is made by -ing noun clauses, or double subject or subject omission, especially in those instances where the dummy "it" or existential "it" needs to be used. The third type of most frequent errors was related to clause patterns, or the organisation of phrases within the clause. The fourth type of most frequent error was about preposition use, especially when conjunctions were needed, and prepositions were used instead. The final type of error that made the top five list was errors with verb patterns, especially the ones that are followed by indirect objects (explain, make) or clauses (regret).

Secondly, in the GJT, the errors containing conjunctions, pronouns, and adverbs, had a successful percentage of accuracy in their corrections (above 67 %), which seems to reveal that the participants were

aware of the errors in these categories. However, the data also suggests that they were unaware of the errors with prepositions, verb patterns, clause patterns, parallel structures, fixed phrases, and nouns. Prepositions used as conjunctions had one of the lowest accurate judgements, below 60 %, as well as other preposition problems, such as the confusion between *to* and *for*. Another item that scored lower than 60 % of accuracy was the clause patterns in indirect questions and the verbs mentioned before in the error analysis results section (such as *regret* and *make*). One task that presented low unsuccessful judgements (below 20 % of accuracy) was the use of correlative conjunction *not only but also*. Regarding fixed phrases, *as result* and *by your own* were unsuccessfully judged as correct, with 58 % and 42 % of accuracy respectively. An error containing the adjective *scientific* disguised as a plural noun was accurately judged by only 50 % of the participants.

Finally, the survey revealed that the participants' thoughts about the most difficult grammatical contents to master were the same as the errors found in the error analysis and the GJT, given that the top five chosen categories were prepositions, conjunctions, verb patterns, adjectives, and verb forms. The survey also suggested that, in terms of useful strategies to use in their writing process, the students mentioned working with classmates and teachers collaboratively, and practising and learning from errors, which suggest that the participants see errors as essential part of their learning. Participants also noticed, after having participated in our study, that using meta-linguistic terms to categorise their errors and tracking them down once they occur promotes self-monitoring and linguistic awareness, which in turn promote reflection, both of which are essential components for improvement in language development.

In wanting to uncover what our students' most common writing errors at a point in their English teaching programme were, we were able to characterise their written competence, check their overall level of grammatical proficiency, and suggest different feedback ideas which can serve as scaffolds to improve future students' writings in the curricular activities available in English training programmes, encouraging to see the errors as opportunities to better understand the target language, instead as just seeing them as signs of failure, since they can become tools to promote reflection.

Some of the limitations we faced in our study were related to the different methods used for data analysis. We are aware that the quality of the answers obtained from other sources of data gathering could have captured the nuances of students' beliefs in a more fruitful way, as well as our understanding of the depth of their metalinguistic and metacognitive skills. For example, the study could have benefited from an interview with open questions instead of a survey, which was applied online, and which had a fair number of questions that were closed or semi-closed. Another factor that may have been improved was to have a better control of the number of participants during the second and third tasks for data collection, since there were significantly less students who participated in the GJT and the survey than those sampled in the error analysis. As the study took place during the COVID pandemic, all of the data collected had to be done using digital and online resources, avoiding direct contact with the participants. Additionally, we could have benefited from tracing each participant's actual proficiency level at the beginning as well as at the end of the data gathering process, to check how much progress has actually been made individually. In our present study, we did not consider level of proficiency as a variable that was controlled or accounted for in order to analyse the results.

For future research we propose to use oral texts as data for analysis in order to see what the errors being produced in this modality of text production are, as spontaneous speech presents its own additional set of challenges for L2 learners, and those results could even be compared to the results obtained in the present study. Additionally, we propose to use interviews or focus groups to really capture the depth of our students' thoughts and opinions about this subject matter both at the beginning as well as at the end of the data collection process so that a more complete account of the progress is made. It would serve to track not only how their opinions develop throughout the learning acquisition process, but also their capacity to see how their metalanguage discourse develops, which is a fundamental skill which language teachers should be able to master.

Lastly, we propose to use the findings of the present study to develop a well-sustained feedback plan for written texts, which includes aspects such as a well-defined and comprehensive conceptual and methodological framework shared by both students and teachers; a stage of

collaborative work such as Collective Peer Scaffolding (Hanjani, 2019), and a reflective stage where errors are discussed and destigmatised, so that they are finally understood as a natural result of everyone's language learning process as well as an opportunity for improvement.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Grammaticality Judgement test:

First of all, we invite you to take part in this investigation in the field of error analysis. Be assured that all answers you provide will be kept in the strictest confidentiality and the data will be gathered, analysed, and published anonymously.

We encourage you to take 20 minutes to complete this questionnaire on your own, based on your own knowledge.

QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDELINES:

For each sentence below, write “okay” for the correct sentences and “wrong” for the incorrect sentences. If a sentence is not okay, please correct it and explain briefly why it is wrong.

If you are not sure why a sentence is wrong, you could write something like “I’m not sure if this is right or wrong”, “I think it’s wrong but I don’t know why”, or add your own comments. The first two have been done for you:

1. 2My team played bad and lost the tournament”
 - Wrong, it should be: My team played badly... (after verb played we need an adverb)
2. “Even though everyone played well, we lost the game”
 - Okay
1. Many people quit school because they think is a waste of time.
2. I haven’t met the student who he is standing in the back.
3. Chew gum in class is rude.
4. This pop band are together since 2013.
5. Shakespeare was not only a writer but also an actor.
6. His capacity for learn languages is astonishing.
7. Smoking should be ban in all public places.
8. Parents often tried to do their best, but they are also allowed to make mistakes.
9. I think my students are not knowing how to solve the problem presented.
10. This is a mystery that has baffled scientifics for many years.
11. Researches have shown that babies in the womb can be influenced by music.
12. There are lots of books that can be read to children.
13. This issue has almost any importance to people in rural areas.
14. The paper recycling is beneficial to avoid deforestation.
15. She cannot decide if to marry him or not.
16. I can’t help you unless you don’t tell me what is wrong.
17. The recent discovery should prove beneficial for many AIDS patients.
18. The leaves are already starting to change of colour.
19. She was very good at maths despite she found it boring.
20. The police are investigating fraud allegations against the candidate.

21. Recycling is a good way to manage waste despite of its cost.
22. Due to he receives a large volume of letters Dave regrets that he is unable to answer queries personally.
23. You shouldn't be out by your own at this time of night.
24. He's determined to prove his innocence, even he has to go to the highest court.
25. The man was seen acting suspiciously.
26. He didn't tell me who's names were on the list.
27. I never understood that she meant by that.
28. She mentioned about she might be late.
29. He regretted to have mentioned that.
30. Schools shouldn't focus exclusively in exam results.
31. The teacher congratulated them on producing a clear and authoritative work.
32. The doctors explained me the risks before the operation.
33. Technology promises to make easier our lives.
34. Can you tell me what the best way to go to the post office is?
35. We still don't know whether it exists life in the universe.
36. Sleeping in a strange bed is for my daughter stressful.
37. Mary likes hiking, swimming, and ride a bicycle.
38. She wrote not only the text but also selected the illustrations.
39. All flights were cancelled as result of the pilots' strike.
40. We went by bus because of it was cheaper.

Appendix B: Online questionnaire

The following section aims at getting to know your opinions and beliefs about the main challenges of achieving grammatical accuracy in your writings as practicum students soon to become English teachers.

Please be as frank and succinct as possible in your answers:

- I. In your opinion, what were the most difficult grammatical contents to learn while studying English at university and why were they so difficult to master?
- II. Of the elements below, tick the five most common grammatical errors you made as a student when writing essays:
 1. use of prepositions (at, on, despite)
 2. use of conjunctions (and, or, if, not only...but also, neither...nor)
 3. use of verb patterns (verbs + ing or infinitive, verbs followed by two objects or no object, etc.)
 4. problems using adjectives (hard, harder, hardest) and adverbs (first, even, still)
 5. use of verb forms (tenses, auxiliaries, modals, etc.)
 6. problems with nouns (countable/uncountable, collective, noun choice, etc.)
 7. problems organising the parts of a sentence (subject, verb, object, adverb, etc.)
 8. use of subjects (missing subject, duplicate subject, etc.)
 9. problems with determiners (article the, a /an, some, any, his, their, no, etc.)
 10. problems with pronouns (he/she, that, who, them, nobody, etc.)
- III. What strategies did you use to prevent the occurrence of grammatical errors while writing academic texts in English?
- IV. When teachers correct errors, some point them out by giving the correct answer, while others give you a clue about the type of error you made. Which option makes you learn better to avoid these errors in the future? Why?
- V. In your opinion, what other strategies can EFL teachers use to give feedback and correct students' grammatical errors when writing essays at university?