Recurrent and not-so-recurrent pragmatic errors in academic writing in English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

In our globalised world, the need for a common language encourages the massive learning of English. Much effort has been dedicated to helping to improve proficiency at different levels of language learning, but, as students face more significant levels of complexity, proficiency in pragmatic aspects of language continues to be deficient (Romero-Trillo, 2002; Mestre-Mestre and Carrió Pastor, 2013). This facet must be addressed in the Foreign Language (FL) classroom (Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Wang, 2007). In this regard, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), grounded in the communicative approach, has provided guidelines for teaching and established Foreign Language proficiency levels. The CEFR Companion Volume proposed more detailed descriptors to identify and outline language proficiency. The present paper displays a 10-year pseudo-longitudinal study of a learner corpus of 125 written texts produced by University students in which pragmatic (coherence and cohesion) errors are analysed. The aim of the study has been to examine improvement in student production in the years subsequent to the publication of the reference book. Results point to errors that have been minimised after training and instruction, but they also identify some recurrent errors in written English as an FL.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, CEFR companion volume, pragmatic error, writing, learner corpus.

RESUMEN

En un mundo globalizado, la necesidad de una lengua común está fomentando el aprendizaje masivo del inglés. Se ha dedicado mucho esfuerzo a ayudar a mejorar la competencia en diferentes niveles de aprendizaje de la lengua, pero, a medida que los estudiantes enfrentan mayores niveles de complejidad, la competencia en los aspectos pragmáticos de la lengua extranjera (LE) sigue siendo deficiente (Romero-Trillo, 2002; Mestre-Mestre y Carrió Pastor, 2013). Esta cuestión debe abordarse en el aula de lengua extranjera (Sperber y Wilson, 1995; Wang, 2007). En este sentido, el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (MCER), basado en el enfoque comunicativo, ha proporcionado pautas para enseñar y ha establecido niveles de competencia en lenguas extranjeras. El volumen complementario del MCER propuso descriptores más detallados para identificar y representar el dominio de la lengua. El presente artículo presenta un estudio pseudo-longitudinal de un corpus de aprendices de 125 textos escritos producidos por estudiantes universitarios en el que se analizan errores pragmáticos (de coherencia y cohesión). El objetivo del estudio ha sido examinar la mejora en la producción de los estudiantes en los años posteriores a la publicación del libro de referencia. Los resultados apuntan a errores que se han minimizado después de la preparación y la instrucción, pero también identifican algunos errores recurrentes en la escritura del inglés como LE.

Palabras clave: inglés como lengua extranjera, volumen complementario del MCER, error pragmático, escritura, corpus de aprendices.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly global world, language learning has become crucial for students in education and for future work and life prospects. As a result of this, more attention has progressively been paid to communication in languages other than one's own, and the need to speak at least one Foreign Language (FL) seems indisputable to University students. This FL language is often English in Spanish Universities.

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The acquisition of pragmatic competence, described as the 'ability to produce and comprehend […] discourse that is adequate to the L2/[FL] socio-cultural context in which interaction takes place' (Kecskes, 2013: 64), is a booming field of research in language learning. On account of its complexity, the need to raise pragmatic awareness in foreign language learning and production has been highlighted as far back as Sperber and Wilson (1995), Verschueren (1999), Kasper and Rose (2001), Barron (2005), or Álvarez Gil (2019).

FL can prove extremely challenging in the case of written production, as students rely on their interlanguage pragmatic knowledge based on their own language use (Kasper, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999), and they frequently focus on grammar and vocabulary to produce their texts. However, apart from being able to construct simple grammatical sentences, they are expected to recognise and produce different text types and genres, identify and appropriately use different registers and different degrees of formality, and appropriate connectors, markers, etc.

Repeatedly, some pragmatic aspects of language are not learnt by FL students who have otherwise proven good and even proficient language levels (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Rico Martín and Níkleva, 2016). Indeed, either due to language interference, misinterpretation, or other causes, students lack competence related to pragmatic aspects of language, such as the use of discourse markers (Romero-Trillo, 2002) or the expression of illocutionary force in speech acts (Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). Indeed, it seems that "high levels of grammatical competence do not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic competence" (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999: 686). A valuable perspective to explore this is to view errors as a temporary point in the language learning process (Salem, 2007; Mestre-Mestre and Carrió Pastor, 2013), focus on those more likely to happen at a given level of proficiency, and help students acknowledge and correct them to progress.

The present work set out to analyse changes in the acquisition of FL pragmatic competence for students of English at university after continued teaching practice with a communicative approach (CA). Also, it intended to pinpoint errors that pose more significant challenges for students since they persist over the years so that students' needs could be identified and their proficiency in the FL increase. These are, therefore, the objectives of the present study: firstly, to determine the types of errors students make when writing in English as an FL in a specific domain; secondly, to identify whether the categories of errors students incur are repeated through the years, after the publication of the CEFR recommendations for language teaching, and finally, to determine what those errors are within each error class.

To explore whether student writing has improved after years of communicative FL teaching, the study uses the CEFR specific guidelines for FL teaching as reference items to analyse student written production to analyse students' pragmatic skills over an interval of 10 years. For that, the types of pragmatic errors in written texts are examined. The study permits the identification of archetypal errors students produced when teaching was set on grammatical aspects of the language but which they no longer make. These errors have been termed in the present paper *non-recurrent* since students no longer make them. However, others prevail despite having increased instruction in pragmatic aspects of the FL. We have considered these *recurrent errors* in line with Ferris (2002).

It is a 10-year pseudo-longitudinal analysis of coherence and cohesion errors in the written production in their English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class of University students with a B1 level of proficiency, considering the descriptors provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) and the 2018 CEFR Companion Volume (henceforth CEFR Companion).

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The paper is organised as follows; after this introduction, the theoretical background is explained, including foreign language acquisition and pragmatic awareness, error analysis, and the CEFR Companion. After this, the materials and methods used for the study are described. Then, in the results section, the error types encountered and their progression throughout the years are displayed, and finally, the discussion and conclusions section.

1.1. Pragmatic awareness and pragmatic competence

Learning a foreign language is a long process, which involves both a significant effort on the side of the student and the use of a series of strategies on the side of teachers to help learners improve, which researchers help identify. The CA has been mainstream in the teaching of EFL for the past forty years. The main idea supported by this model is that language is essentially communication. Therefore language proficiency entails knowledge of other dimensions of language apart from grammar, such as socio-cultural aspects or interculturality. Communicative language teaching has focused on implementing "methodologies which stimulate the development of functional language abilities through learners' participation in communicative events" (Savignon, 1991).

This entire teaching practice is learner-centred since it considers the students' specific needs. The critical difference between traditional and learner-centred curriculum development is that in the latter, learning is produced by a collaborative effort to ensure that students' needs are considered and addressed. Indeed, in the teacher's decision-making process regarding the choice of curriculum content and how it is taught, the students' particular needs are taken into consideration. In Savignon's words (2002: 15):

> "By definition, CLT puts the focus on the learner. Learners' communicative needs provide a framework for elaborating program goals about functional competence. Functional goals imply global, qualitative evaluation of learner achievement instead of quantitative assessment of discrete linguistic features".

Thus, since the priority of the CA is to meet the communicative needs of students, "communicative competence" is prioritised over grammar. The term was coined by Hymes (1967) to refer to contextual aspects that were to be considered as part of the ability to communicate. Then, Canale and Swain (1980) defined it in terms of four components: grammatical competence (rules that have to be applied to use words correctly), sociolinguistic competence (related to appropriateness), discourse competence (the ability to consider cohesion and coherence when using language), and strategic competence, for correct use of communication strategies.

The proposal has been broadly reviewed and rearticulated by scholars such as Bachman (1990), Celce-Murcia et al. (1995), Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), or Celce-Murcia (2007). Based on the communicative approach and its subsequent developments, the Council of Europe designed a reference book in 2001 to promote the teaching of an FL to European learners throughout Europe. The objective of the initiative was not only to establish a common classification of proficiency levels in all the member states but also to propose fixed situations in which students might use the language to help refocus the teaching practice towards more communicative approaches. Here, a new important aspect was introduced: the need to adapt language to the setting of use in particular communicative contexts. Again, this departed from Widdowson's questioning of the traditionally assumed conviction that once basic linguistic skills are acquired, then, the communicative abilities follow automatically (Widdowson, 1978: 67): "What evidence we have, however, suggests that this is not the case: the acquisition of linguistic skills does not seem to guarantee the consequent acquisition of communicative abilities in a language".

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As part of this, a big concern of teachers and scholars is that students reach an appropriate and reliable level of language proficiency in writing. For this, students must have a robust knowledge of grammar and syntax and be conscious and operational in different contexts of language use considering their particularities (register, genre, etc.). Bardovi-Harlig (1999) first referred to the area of research devoted to the development of the pragmatic system in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as 'acquisitional pragmatics' but retitled it as 'L2 pragmatics' (2013).

The need for university students to improve their writing skills to reach full proficiency in an L2 or FL seems decisive (Hubert and Bonzo, 2010; Larsen-Freeman, 2006). Difficulty in writing in an FL causes distress (Sabti et al., 2019) and can be due to many factors, such as cultural differences (Loi and Sweetnam Evans, 2010; Godó, 2008), L1 interference in the rhetorical organisation of the writings (Soler-Monreal et al., 2011), relations and coherence (Taboada and Mann, 2006; Ahmadi and Parhizgar, 2017), or use of pronouns (Tseng, 2016).

The shortages to be addressed vary depending on the students' stage in their learning process and proficiency levels. Particularly concerning writing, whereas early learners must mainly focus on vocabulary and grammar, advanced learners, with grammar proficiency, struggle with pragmatic issues, such as genres or rhetorical organisation (Kern, 2000). Indeed, students who enter Spanish universities must be able to write in an FL, as it is one of the University access examinations. And yet, writing is a complex skill which involves mastery of vocabulary, familiarity with the topic, tone, structure and content of the papers they are required to write. When required to write, students need to choose the appropriate text type, register, or tone. Even when they use them appropriately, intra-textual connectivity and purpose can be off focus, thus incurring errors.

The general need to raise FL pragmatic awareness has been widely acknowledged for a long time (Wilson and Sperber, 1998; Verschueren, 1999; Kasper and Rose, 2001; Barron, 2005, Alcón Soler and Martinez Flor, 2008). Rose and Kasper (2001) advise that explicit instruction of the FL pragmatic rules is practical to acquire pragmatic competence. This idea is supported, for example, by Koike and Pearson (2005), who claim that the rate of acquisition of pragmatic competence is faster when learners receive clear directions and feedback. Other studies have focused on the imitation of specific speech acts, such as compliments (Rose and Ng, 2001 or promises (Maíz Arévalo, 2009). Here, learners' proficiency level is essential in identifying or replicating speech acts and pragmatic conventions (Koike, 1989; García, 2004; McConachy, 2018, 2019). Numerous proposals have been offered with straightforward ways to help students overcome these shortages (Ifantidou, 2011; Carrió-Pastor and Mestre-Mestre, 2011; Mestre-Mestre and Carrió-Pastor, 2013). Such strategies include topic discussion, interaction with native speakers on the internet, individual research, text recognition, collaborative learning, and writing.

1.2. CEFR and CEFR Companion

As mentioned above, the CEFR (2001) has prompted the teaching of second and foreign languages using a CA in Europe. This learner-centred approach promotes the acquisition of all communicative skills, and not just grammar and vocabulary. The 2001 version already included the pragmatic competence and described the abilities a student had to acquire for each level of proficiency.

To adapt curricula to the requirements of the CA, Savignon (2002: 9-11) insisted on the aspects that needed to be included in the new perspective: grammatical competence (sentence-level grammatical forms), "the ability to recognise the lexical, morphological, syntactical and phonological features of a language", discourse competence, i.e. the interconnection of series of expressions to make a whole, including concepts as coherence

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and cohesion, and finally, sociocultural competence, reformulating Canale and Swain's sociolinguistic competence.

The use of the CEFR as a guide has increased the attention paid to acquiring pragmatic competence in an L2/FL (Carrió Pastor and Mestre-Mestre, 2011), particularly at higher proficiency levels. Due to this, it seems interesting to look into student written production and see which pragmatic aspects have been improved throughout the years.

Almost 20 years after the publication of the CEFR, the CEFR Companion insists on the importance of such skills, includes new ones, and details to a greater degree what must be taught, learnt and assessed when acquiring an L2/FL. It offered a revised version of the handbook with additional descriptors complementing those of 2001, which still prevail. It outlined, in greater detail, the skills students should have at the different levels of language proficiency. It also introduced some new aspects to consider in language teaching, such as plurilingualism or the use of telecommunications. Moreover, proposals were included to promote other skills that could be taught together with the FL as part of European education.

As explained in the introduction of the CEFR Companion (2018: 23), the update is carried out by (1) highlighting areas which had no previous descriptors (plurilingual or multilingual competence), (2) including new (transitional) levels of proficiency, (3) adding new scales related to communication in new contexts (online, creative texts, etc.), and (4) improving explanations at the lowest and highest levels of proficiency.

The three communicative competencies: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence, are described (2018: 130). In particular, pragmatic competence is defined as the study of language in context, being primarily concerned with the user/learner's knowledge of the principles of language use (2018: 138). It comprises discourse, functional and design competences. Following the CEFR companion (2018: 138-139):

> Discourse competence concerns the ability to design texts, including generic aspects like "Thematic development", "Coherence and cohesion" […]. Functional competence includes "Flexibility" in the use of one's repertoire and the selection of appropriate sociolinguistic choices. […]. Knowledge of interactional and transactional schemata relates also to sociocultural competence and is to some extent treated under "Sociolinguistic appropriateness" on the one hand and "General linguistic range" and "Vocabulary range" on the other […], pragmatic competence involves "speaker meaning" in context as opposed to the "sentence/dictionary meaning" of words and expressions.

Students must prove greater awareness and mastery of coherence and cohesion, depending on their proficiency level. For instance, for a B1 level of proficiency, a new descriptor has been introduced, connected to the importance of linking words (2018: 142) and the need to write connected sentences:

CEFR (2001: 26-27)	CEFR companion (2018: 142)
Write **simple connected** text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest	Introduce a **counter-argument** in a simple discursive text
Write **personal letters** describing experiences and impressions	**Link a series of shorter**, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear **sequence of points**
	Form longer sentences and **link** them
	Make simple, logical **paragraph breaks** in a longer text.

Table 1. Descriptors for pragmatic competence for B1 in CEFR and CEFR Companion Volume.

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1.3. Error análisis

In 1967, Error Analysis (EA) was launched by Corder as a research analysis model related to the acquisition of an FL. With this approach, language learning began being studied as a process, in which there exist several stages prior to the mastering of the FL/L2. This is what Selinker (1972) would call *interlanguage*, and Corder (1967) referred to as *idiosyncratic dialect*, thus switching the focus of interest to the process, in which users approximate, but do not quite master, the target language. Some errors are due to misunderstandings or misinterpretations, and some are claimed to be more treatable than others (Ferris, 2002).

James (1998) dedicated a significant part of his work to error definition, identification and classification, mainly in the use of English by FL users. He first referred to ignorance as the main cause of errors, which he always analysed by comparing FL production to L1 speaker production, and not to the ideal standard language.

Although SLA and language teaching research abandoned this approach, it has been useful for language teaching purposes, considering error as an indication of the point in the learning process where students stand (Salem, 2007). Yet, newer EA studies study error in EFL and SLA contexts (Garza and Wu, 2014; Yildiz, 2016), whereas others try to account for constructive feedback and correction (Roothoft et al., 2022), Several proposals have hinged on this, as Chen's (2006), related to the usage of computers to improve grammar, Khodabandeh's (2007), focused on diminishing language interference, or McDowell and Liardét's (2020), interested in written production in ESP.

Usually, studies concerning errors have focused on the nature of errors, but some also look into the ability to identify and interpret errors in an FL (Rifkin & Roberts, 1995; Carrió Pastor, 2004; Hamid, 2007; Mestre-Mestre, 2011). FL errors are the result of different causes. Traditionally, these causes have been studied as interlingual errors, due to L1 interference with the second language, and intralingual errors, produced regardless of the L1 and due to deficiencies in the learning process (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1992, James, 1998; Ferris, 2006; Taguchi 2007). Here we propose an analysis grid based on the actual errors, disregarding the causes that have produced them.

2. Materials and methods

EA is an effective tool to study pragmatic errors related to cohesion and coherence. An analysis framework has been elaborated taking into account two different approaches. On the one hand, text cohesion is explored following Halliday and Hasan's 1976 proposal. Cohesion is a semantic concept linked to the associations of meaning within a text. To track it, the notion of a cohesive tie is established; items are cohesively tied when they are linked in a way that results meaningful to the reader. This permits the analysis of texts in terms of cohesive features, and the description of their patterns of texture.

To study coherence, two complementary proposals have been combined. The first is James' (1998, 2001, 2008) distinction between production and reception errors (communication-strategy errors). In this sense, within errors related to coherence are for instance topical coherence, as the "need for the components of a discourse to be relevant to its general topic" (James, 1998: 162), or relational coherence, which determines the "requirement for the propositions constituting a discourse to be related to each other", and the need for sentences and paragraphs to be connected (James, 1998: 162). Finally, sequential coherence refers to the "need for constitutive propositions to be arranged in some effective order", (James, 1998: 162). The second perspective used for the study is provided by Kern (2000), and Oshima and Hogue (2006), with the view that sentences must be linked in a way that helps the reader interpret them.

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2.1. Learner Corpus

The current study presents the top-down analysis of cohesion and coherence errors produced by students enrolled in the degree of Tourism at the Universitat Politècnica de Valencia, with a B1 level of proficiency. Students' writings were produced in their ESP class in their first year after accessing university. Following the teacher's instructions, students wrote several explicit assignments consisting of producing different text types based on the CEFR to develop their pragmatic skills:

> Pragmatic competences are concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions, speech acts), drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges. It also concerns the mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence, the identification of text types and forms, irony, and parody. (CEFR, 2001:13)

The study analyses a corpus of 125 texts; 25 writings were collected in five different academic years in a 10-year time period (2008-2009, 2010-2011, 2012-2013, 2014-2015, and 2016-2017). All the texts were written in ESP English class, as a computer practice assignment in semester B. They were collected randomly.

Following the recommendations in the CEFR for this level of proficiency, students received specific training about three text types, in an ESP English class, and because their area of specialisation (professional domain) was tourism: comparisons, narrations and opinions. The same lecturer taught the five different groups. Through the years, the number and type of activities and the time dedicated to approach pragmatic issues, slightly increased and varied. For instance, speech acts, and the characteristics of each text type were introduced, and practice exercises related to connectors and cohesive devices were completed by students. Other activities involved text recognition, and summary and comparison writing techniques. A session was also dedicated to work with register, text type, and text structure. Students received the following instructions to write the texts:

(1) Write a short dissertation narrating something you found out about another culture while travelling abroad (150 words). (Narration)

(2) Read (here) about cultural issues in the US (stereotypes, personal space, tipping, etc.) and write a short summary about these aspects of American life, comparing them to your own culture (250 words). (Comparison)

(3) Watch the video, and write a short dissertation expressing your opinion about what university student life is and should be (200 words). (Opinion)

The students who wrote the texts (25 from each course) had enrolled the University with a Spanish curriculum, and had passed the University access examination. Three different text types were analysed. In total, 50 opinions were randomly gathered from the academic years 2008-09 and 2010-11, 25 narrations, from 2012-13, and 50 comparisons from 2014-15 and 2016-17. In total, the corpus yielded 26,172 words and 1,296 sentences.

First, the texts were labelled according to the text type and academic year, (08-D-01), for instance, would be a description authored in the 2008-2009 academic year, whereas (14-C-07) would account for a comparison written in the 2014-2015 academic year.

Once the corpus was labelled, the compositions were examined and coherence and cohesion errors were identified using the analysis framework created for this, shown below in Table 3, considering the requirements of the CEFR Companion for a B1 level of proficiency, in which, as seen in Table 1, linking is a central issue.

Subsequently, errors identified in the texts were compared per each academic year, in order to detect the types of cohesion and coherence errors and subsequently compare them throughout the years. The underlying idea was to shed light on which errors need to be approached differently so that they could be overcome. Table 2

shows a detailed description of word and sentence figures for each academic year and type of composition. In it, it can be seen that the number of tokens in the case of narrations is significantly lower than that of opinions and comparisons, as students produced shorter texts.

	Words	Sentences
2008-2009 (O)	5,708	294
2010-2011 (O)	5,152	248
2012-2013 (N)	2,654	139
2014-2015 (C)	5,436	257
2016-2017 (C)	7,222	358
Total corpus	26,172	1,296

Table 2. Number of words and sentences per academic year.

2.2. Analysis

For the top-down pseudo-longitudinal analysis, the data were manually processed and errors were tagged. Errors were afterwards compared. Then, a mixed method combining quantitative-qualitative analyses was carried out to interpret the results for each academic year and obtain a general overview of results. As there existed differences in volume of production and of errors in the corpora, all the results were normalised to 10,000 so that they could be compared.

As cohesion errors were identified, on the one hand, grammatical cohesion errors, i.e., errors related to reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunctions, and, on the other, lexical cohesion errors. Reference errors included sentences in which there was no clear referent in the text, and errors in substitution implied confusion in the terms to be replaced. Additionally, incorrect omissions within a sentence, in order to avoid repetition, were tagged as ellipsis errors. Conjunction errors included sentences that either lacked or misused logical connectors, and finally lexical cohesion errors identified inaccurate repetitions of the same referent in the texts.

Coherence errors included topical errors (where components failed to be relevant to the full text or to the subject proposed), relational errors (focusing on the way in which propositions were related to each other, the use of transition signals and connectors), and sequential errors, which referred to the effective logical order of texts parts. Table 3 displays an outline of the analysis framework used.

			Error
Cohesion (Halliday and Hasan, 1976)	Grammatical	Reference	No reference
		Substitution	Confusion in terms to be replaced
		Ellipsis	Incorrect omission
		Conjunctions	Lack or misuse of connectors
	Lexical		Word repetition
Coherence (James, 1998; Kern, 2000; Oshima and Hogue, 2006)	Topical		Components failed to be relevant
	Relational		Sentence bonding, transition signals
	Sequential		Effective logical order

Table 3. Analysis framework used for the study of the texts.

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3. Results

In this section, a quantitative presentation of results is offered, followed by some illustrative examples extracted from the texts, obtained from a qualitative study of the findings. As the corpus for each academic year differs, in number of words and sentences, percentages of errors have been normalised and analysed separately for all categories. However, error categories from all the academic years are compared to establish the progression –to clarify in which fields there has been improvement. In this case, results have been normalised to 10,000, so that comparison could be truly established and be useful. Table 4 displays the total number of errors analysed per academic year studied. Then, these errors are analysed per each particular year, in order to identify differences in the distribution of error types.

Year	Substit.	Reference	Ellipsis	Conjunction	Lexical cohesion	Topical	Relational	Sequential	Total
2008	0	21	14	10	5	15	10	6	81
2010	0	23	6	18	3	24	8	5	87
2012	0	35	11	13	8	14	2	3	86
2014	0	28	10	27	13	30	21	11	140
2016	0	32	8	25	8	22	15	4	114

Table 4. Total number of error types per year studied.

During the first two academic years analysed, students wrote opinions. First of all, a general view of error distribution for the first academic year analysed, 2008-2009 is displayed. The graph shows the distribution of errors in percentages within the year analysed.
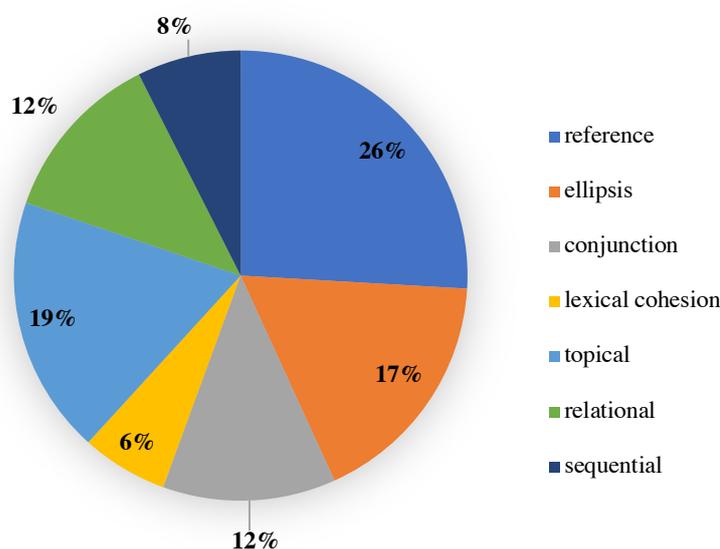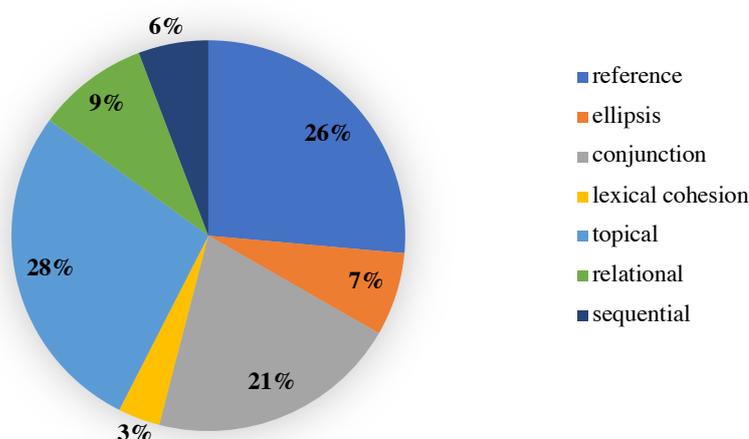

Graph 1. Coherence and cohesion errors in texts written in 2008-09.

As can be seen in the graph, cohesion errors (reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunctions), add up 60% of all errors encountered. Major causes for cohesion errors during that academic year were related to reference. Indeed, 26% of errors were related to erroneous use of pronouns, singular/plural concordances or other issues related to reference, such as subject/pronoun repetition. Ellipsis, or rather, the absence of ellipsis, was also a significant cause for error. Regarding coherence errors, topical cohesion came first, with errors related to the inclusion of off-topic matters in the compositions. Some examples of these types of errors can be found below:

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(1)   REFERENCE. during a lecture, instead of attending regularly to them (08-O-01).

(2)   ELLIPSIS. we must study 3 hours (…) we must sleep 8 hours (…) we must read more. (08-D-02).

(3)   TOPICAL. The subjects, sometimes, are plenty of theory and the Educational Autorities should pay more attention to work market necessities. (08-O-10). (When speaking about student time dedicated to study).

The distribution of error types encountered in texts written during the 2010-2011 academic year point to an analogous distribution than that of the 2008-2010. Graph 2 represents these results with percentages for each category to account for all the errors found during this period analysed.
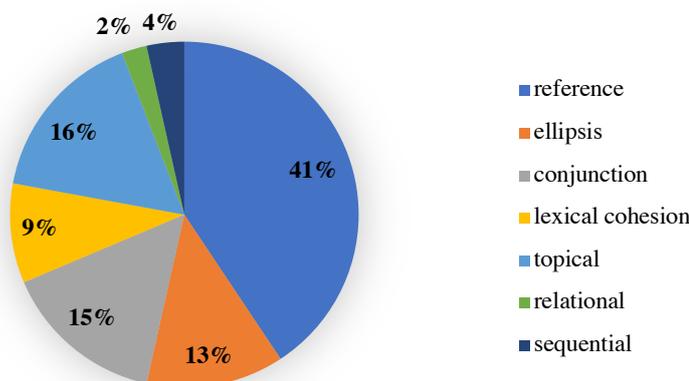

Graph 2. Coherence and cohesion errors in texts written in 2010-11.

Percentages are calculated for the total of errors of this particular year, and it can be seen that cohesion errors account for 57% of the 87 errors identified for this period, of which the most common ones are reference errors (around half of them). Then, the second most common cause of coherence errors in this slot are conjunctions. As in the previous case, the greatest amount of coherence errors corresponds to topical errors, which actually are the second most common cause of error in this group. Examples of these are displayed below.

(4)   REFERENCE. technology is developing herselves very quickly (10-O-19).

(5)   CONJUNCTIONS. We just think the same things (party, watch TV, and speak with friends …) Us anything we want and less if they are university subjects. (10-O-07).

(6)   TOPICAL. we have to be aware and interrogate everything. this life is so complicated I think that. We have to get more skills for being successful and living better life. (10-O-17).

Graph 3 displays the results for the 2012-2013 academic year, grouped in the error types chosen for analysis. Here, findings are slightly different from those obtained in the previous years, as there is clearly one error type that surpasses the rest, accounting for almost half of all the errors for that particular year. It must be recalled that the text type analysed here are narrations, accounting for a much smaller number of words.

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Graph 3. Coherence and cohesion errors in texts written in 2012-13.

As can be seen, the great majority are cohesion errors, accounting for almost 80% of the total in writings produced this academic year. For the remaining 20% (a total of 19 errors), the most common coherence errors in this group correspond to topical errors, i.e., cases in which students failed to stick to the topic proposed. Examples 7 and 8 illustrate this.

(7) REFERENCE. that they arrive in his country to them (12-C-12).

(8) TOPICAL. All right let´s say that I understand their religion but it still sounds very weird that they don´t celebrate the revive of Jesus Christ . This holiday let me very surprised of how other cultures can be! (12-C-9).

During the 2014-15 academic year, errors were much more evenly distributed amongst types, although the number of cohesion than coherence errors is slightly higher than in other cases. Graph 4 displays them.
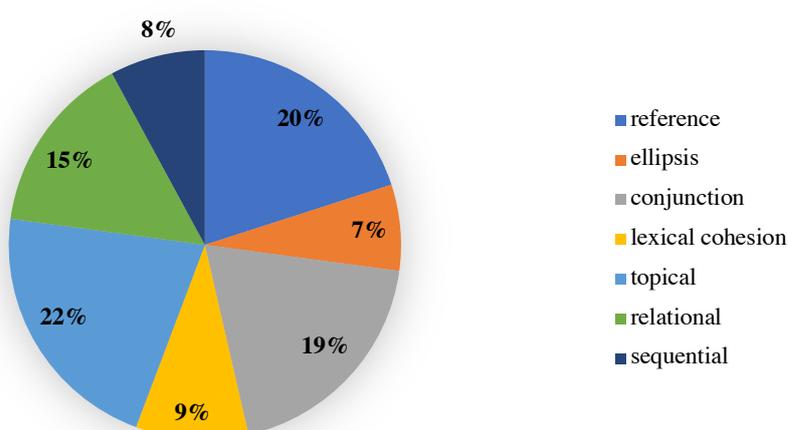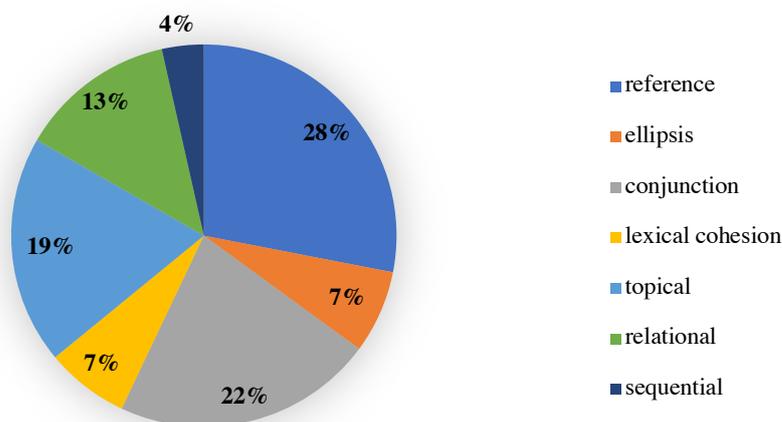

Graph 4. Coherence and cohesion errors in texts written in 2014-15.

Results for the academic year 2014-15 show a more uniform distribution of errors, always led by cohesion errors (with 67% of all cases). However, within those, 20% correspond to reference errors, and 19% to conjunction-

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related errors. The least common source of error is ellipsis. With regards coherence errors, topical, followed by relational errors, seem to be the great majority of erroneous expressions. Some examples (9-12) are presented below.

(9)   REFERENCE. they arrive as soon as you can (14-C-3).

(10) CONJUNCTION. Other aspect different they have Americans from Spanish live is that Americans have space personal (14-C-9).

(11) TOPICAL. when you are drunk you have to leave and go with all the people in some pubs or night clubs , if you have a nice night party you have to tell the next day how drunk and how good was the night (14-C-3).

(12) RELATIONAL. had received a horrible service. I also wanted to talk about the noises in public places. (14-C-2).

Finally, 2016-2017 academic year shows a pattern that is more similar to the 2012-13 academic year than to the 2014-2015 academic year, as we find again a majority of errors related to reference, as can be seen in Graph 5.
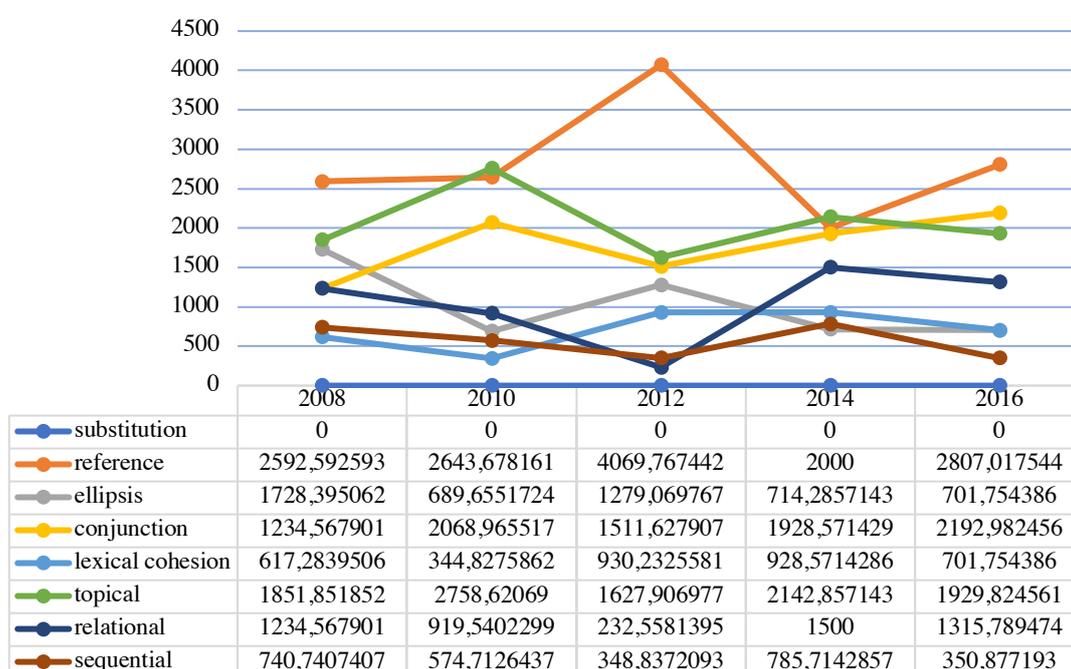

Graph 5. Coherence and cohesion errors in texts written in 2016-17.

The 2016-1017 academic year presents 64% of errors related to cohesion. Here, reference and conjunction errors account for half of the errors spotted. Regarding coherence errors, topical and relational errors are the most common in this set. Examples for this are shown below (examples 13-16).

(13) REFERENCE. each person has their personal reasons (16-C-12).

(14) CONJUNCTION. For become ,after I read a documents about the some aspects of life in America , I believe that I can explain many differents aspects of the two models of life. (16-C-10).

(15) TOPICAL. people that reside in American are persons more exaggerate than the Valencia because, they have very temperament and they have more exciting see the TV, play the football, change people Valencians also have temperament (16-C-20)

(16) RELATIONAL. In spain more people think that in spain everything is bad, other countries are best, althought in spain there are more good things. Is a stereotype but i think that is true. (16-C-7).

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While it is problematic to establish comparisons amid the different categories spotted during the same time period, due to the difference in substance of the errors identified (some involve a word, some a full sentence), it is interesting to compare the same category through the years, in order to determine whether there have been changes within the categories. For this comparison, results obtained for the different academic years were normalised to 10,000. This was necessary since the number of words and sentences in the texts, and the number of errors identified, varied in the different academic years.

Graph 6 illustrates a comparison of error type per academic year. Results have been normalised to 10,000, so that the results per each academic year could be comparable. This way, the evolution of error types can be seen. Some error types occurrences diminish in time (for instance, ellipsis or topical errors), whereas in other contexts students seem to have greater problems than before (as conjunctions or relational errors).


	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016
substitution	0	0	0	0	0
reference	2592,592593	2643,678161	4069,767442	2000	2807,017544
ellipsis	1728,395062	689,6551724	1279,069767	714,2857143	701,754386
conjunction	1234,567901	2068,965517	1511,627907	1928,571429	2192,982456
lexical cohesion	617,2839506	344,8275862	930,2325581	928,5714286	701,754386
topical	1851,851852	2758,62069	1627,906977	2142,857143	1929,824561
relational	1234,567901	919,5402299	232,5581395	1500	1315,789474
sequential	740,7407407	574,7126437	348,8372093	785,7142857	350,877193

Graph 6. Coherence and cohesion errors between 2008 to 2016.

From Graph 6, it can be derived that problems with conjunctions have increased in time. Clearly, they are the most common error type, as they have greater frequency of use. Hence, the graph helps visualising the progression over time of the same error type. Also, that text type could have an effect on the types of errors students make. In Graph 7, causes of error in this category are represented, normalised to 10,000 occurrences. Indeed, it can be seen, whether these causes are lack of connectors, or wrong use of linking words. As explained above, supplementary descriptors have been introduced in the CEFR Volume related to the need for a good command of connectors in this specific level of proficiency.
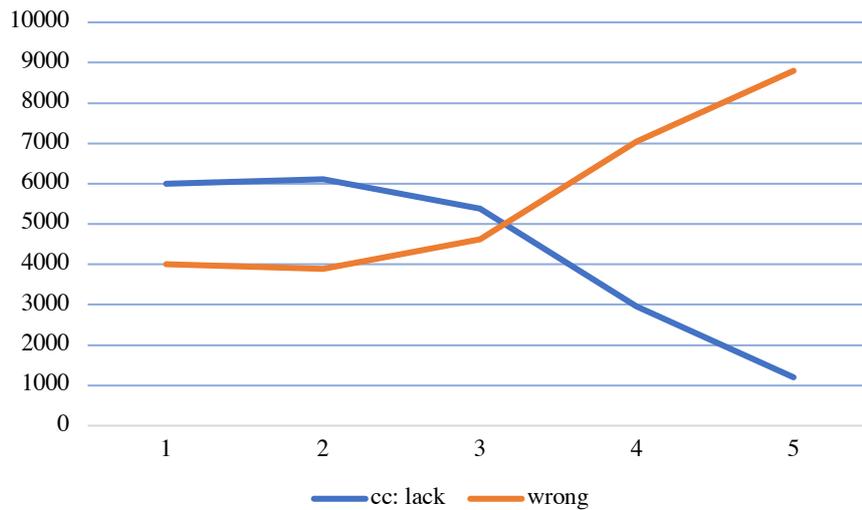
Graph 7. Errors related to the use of connectors. 2008 to 2016.

Similarly, Graph 8 (below) displays the type of reference errors students incurred into when writing in English, normalised to 10,000. Three main categories have been established: cc lack (lack of singular/plural concordance or subject-verb agreement, and determiner/adjective-noun concordance errors), wrong (misuse of pronouns, and other – substitution, or ellipsis errors).
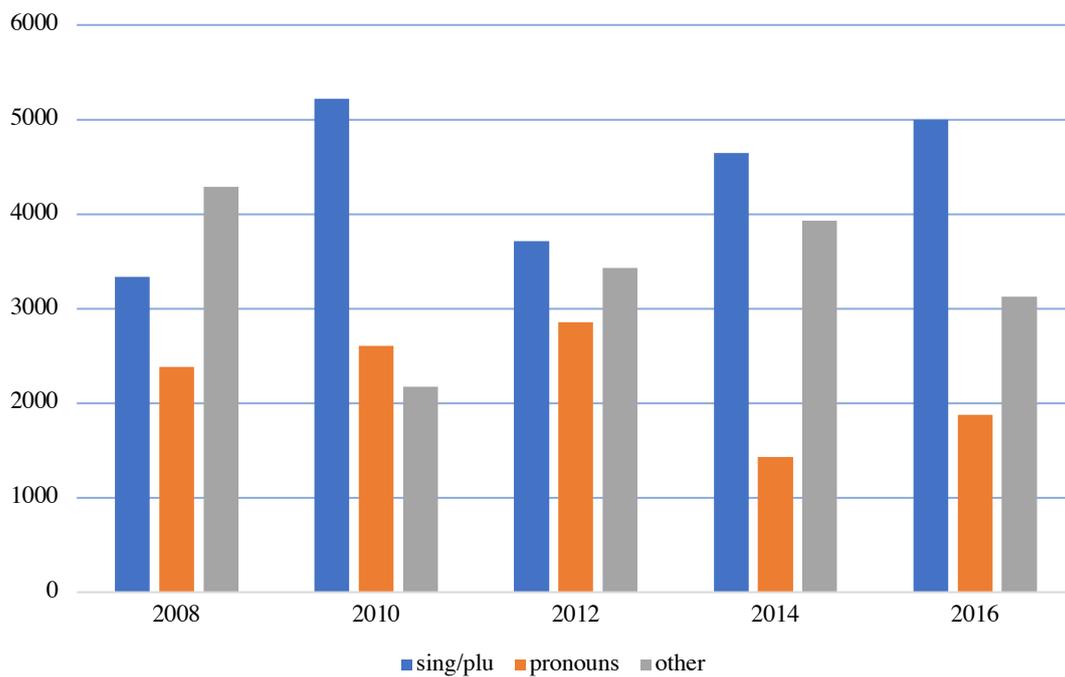
Graph 8. Errors related to reference. 2008 to 2017.

In this graph, it is seen that some errors (singular/plural) concordance are very common in the corpus analysed, and are steady over time, whereas there seems to be improvement in student use of pronouns in students' texts.

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4. Discussion and conclusions

At certain levels of proficiency (once the basic L2/FL language skills have been achieved), students find difficulty in improving more complex aspects of language, such as pragmatic related issues, which hinder their communication skills. Indeed, although students learn the grammar of a language, other aspects of language do not necessarily come naturally with its use.

Writing is a difficult ability to master, since it requires linguistic expertise and command of grammar, spelling and punctuation, but also entails other communicative skills, such as sociolinguistic or pragmatic competences -knowledge of rhetorical organisation, command of vocabulary, or register appropriateness. For this reason, writing in an L2/FL is even more challenging, since many impeding factors might apply (L1 interference, different text structures than in L1, differences of tone or degree of formality).

Although the corpus used for the present research is not large, which obviously implies some limitations to the results obtained, it has been collected conscientiously over time. All the texts studied were written as classwork in the ESP class in the same university degree (Tourism), and the same university (UPV), and taught by the same instructor. Errors in these texts help us identify the kind of shortages B1 language proficient students have when facing writing in a professional domain, in this case, the Tourism Industry.

The CEFR Companion provides specific descriptions for proficiency levels, which makes errors, and therefore improvement possibilities, easier to spot and handle. It also seems to be more ambitious vis-à-vis communicative skills of students not only in the personal domain but also in the social, educational and professional domains. Indeed, students are expected to be able to complete certain tasks with greater proficiency and language awareness to comply with language level expectations in different contexts. Following the guidelines, new activities related to pragmatic awareness were progressively introduced in the syllabus, such as identifying and characterising reports, summaries and descriptions, identifying text types and linking sentences with simple to more complex connectors. However, from the results of the study, it can be seen that some of the problems (errors) are repeated by students over time, despite teaching strategies which include more work dedicated to pragmatic and discourse matters, as well as domain-specific areas.

Results have shown that, despite the augmented focus on pragmatic topics in the language classroom to increase pragmatic awareness, some recurrent coherence and cohesion errors persist. In contrast, other error types have diminished through the years. They are what Ferris (2002) would call "treatable" errors and what we have called here not recurrent since they have not persisted through the years but have evolved or disappeared and are no longer found in students' writings.

By comparing results per academic year, a clearer view of the evolution through the years can be obtained. In some cases, the results are quite analogous. Reference errors are the most common in all the cases. Indeed, some error types are present in large numbers one academic year after another, showing similar peaks of incidence, such as conjunction or relational errors, usually followed by errors related to conjunction misuse and off-topic sentences.

In other cases, students have changed the type of errors they make. Two sorts of errors have been documented with connecting words; problems are related to the lack or incorrect use of connectors and linking words in the texts. In the graph, the evolution of errors can be perceived. It seems that, regrettably, there are error types in which students not only do not improve but achieve worse results, for instance, relational errors. Indeed, after some years of similar results, students use more connectors as time passes, but they misuse them. This could be interpreted as students' superficial understanding of the need to use connectors in a text but lacking the necessary

comprehension of their function. In-depth analysis and teaching of connectors and exercises destined to distinguish and use them properly could help improve this on the side of students.

Still, a decrease in number of other error types has also been identified. That would be the case of relational or lexical cohesion errors. The number of these declines through the years, possibly denoting improvement due to better understanding and use. Also, there are error types that maintain meager numbers or zero occurrences, as is the case of substitution.

Considering the descriptors for B1 in the CEFR Companion, ("link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points, form longer sentences and link them, and make simple, logical paragraph breaks in a longer text"), and the results obtained, it would seem that our students are required to write texts with greater degrees of difficulty than before. In some cases, they do not succeed, and they make pragmatic errors related to connectors.

In fact, it can be observed that students write straightforward sentences, and have problems using the correct connectors. In the oldest texts, students used less connectors than necessary for coherent and cohered writings, whereas, in the newest texts, students seem to be aware that they need to use connectors but do not use them properly. Another unresolved issue for students is reference errors, particularly singular and plural, topic (off-topic texts), or conjunctions (lack of use, misuse).

Most errors found in the texts written by students are recurrent (repeated over time). In addition, sentences written by students are nowadays shorter and less complex instead of what is recommended in the CEFR Companion, and therefore expected in this level of proficiency. Moreover, except in the cases when the instruction provides sequencing, texts do not have any text structure or sequencing mark. Of concern are errors related to the lack of understanding of the proposed topic. Further, more focused and specific classwork seems necessary in pragmatics, particularly in the items identified as particularly problematic, for students to be truly proficient in an FL, English in a professional domain, in our case.

These findings are consistent with Ahmadi & Parhizgar (2017). They state that the concept of coherence is little understood by students and that most common errors in student writing are related to content, topic, connectedness or relation. They are also coherent with Tseng's (2016) study of texts written by Taiwanese EFL learners, where pronouns are identified as a significant cause of error and more difficult to eradicate (they are recurrent errors). Also, errors related to sentence topics depend on pragmatic knowledge, as they rest on the rhetorical structure of texts, and further instruction is necessary for students to perform. Indeed, Taboada and Mann (2006) claim a tight connection between relations and coherence in texts, which, when misused, is a major cause of error in writing; also, that not all errors are equally important since some produce higher levels of incoherency than other.

The study shows that students have improved in some aspects of their writing skills, as the number of topical or sequential errors has diminished in time. Also that, in their writings, there are fewer errors related to lack of connectors over time.

Although the research paper has some limitations, due to the corpus size and the fact that the writings analysed were not written by the same students, it brings some light to the present needs of university students to improve their writing skills, which could be born in mind when teachers elaborate their curricula, as all the texts studied were written during student's first year at university.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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About the author

Eva M. Mestre-Mestre is lecturer at the Universitat Politècnica de València. Her research has focused on pragmatics, English language teaching, and corpus linguistics.

She has been panel director for AESLA and AELINCO associations. She has been awarded a José Castillejo 2019 scholarship and completed several research stays abroad. She has published several books and book chapters and numerous articles in renowned international journals.

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